Background

Please provide an overview of your local civic leadership/organizational affiliations (please describe, in particular, your engagement with the local school system and local educational advocacy). What specific insights into our local community have you garnered from this work? In what ways has this work motivated you to campaign for school board membership? Please describe, in particular, your engagement with the local school system and local educational advocacy

My name is Ashton Powell and I am running for the CHCCS Board of Education.
I am a father of two children at Carrboro Elementary, one in the Spanish Dual Language program and the other in the traditional program.

I am a public school teacher at the North Carolina School of Science & Mathematics (NCSSM) in Durham, where, for the past 10 years, I have taught biology to talented 11th and 12th grade students from across the state. I hold a PhD in Neurobiology from UNC-CH and am a National Board-Certified Teacher in Science/Adolescent & Young Adulthood. In addition to teaching, I served as the Faculty Senate President at NCSSM for 4 years. I was appointed be the first faculty member to sit on the Board of Trustees of NCSSM, making me one of the only faculty members to sit on a UNC System Board of Trustees. This has helped me understand the challenges facing my school from a much different perspective.

NCSSM is a high school that is part of the 17 campus UNC System. I have been fortunate to serve on the UNC Faculty Assembly, a body which provides the faculty voice and opinion to the leadership of the UNC System. Having served on the Executive Committee for the Assembly, I have successfully pushed the culture of the Assembly from responsive antagonism to forming functional relationships with the leadership of the UNC System, from the President, to the Board of Governors. This enables us to constructively participate on policy before it reaches a vote at the Board.

My experiences have helped me see our educational system all the way from Pre-K, to CHCCS students reaching me at NCSSM. I am also able to follow our kids into the UNC system, which has helped me better understand how well we are preparing them for this next step. Importantly, my experiences have helped me see how diverse students need to be met where they are. We have to create a system that helps every student believe that their school is truly there for their success.

On a side note, I designed the Calendar for Carrboro Elementary two years ago to raise money for the PTA. My favorite months were the Stranger Things and Magic School Bus pictures.

Racial Disparities in Academic and Disciplinary Outcomes;
Application of the REIA & Racial Equity Analysis

1. **The racial achievement gap on test scores in CHCCS is the second largest in the state and one of the largest in the U.S. (e.g., in school year 2017-2018, 83.8% of White students in grades 3-8 scored "College and Career Ready" on EOG exams, as compared to only 29.4% of Black students, and 37.3% of Latinx students)[1]. In fact, according to the recent [Racial Equity Report Card,](#) CHCCS, one of the wealthiest school districts in the state, ranks #47 compared to other districts in terms of the academic outcomes of our Black students.**
    a. **What is your explanation for this large achievement gap and our relatively poor performance in the education of our Black students?**

I think results like these show that money in the school system is not the solution to the achievement gap. By many reasonable measures, our district should be a leader in eradicating the gap due to the many things we have going for us: we have significant funding compared to most, are a community built around education, and have a population that is increasingly diverse. Importantly, our local politics suggest that this district has the legitimate interest in ensuring equity across all human definitions of identity. But yet our schools have both one of the largest achievement gaps in the state as well as some of the lowest performance of Black and Hispanic students as shown by College and Career Ready measures.

So what are remaining factors holding us back?

Externally, we are facing issues of transgenerational and systemic racism that directly impact our students and their families. No matter the gains we achieve inside our district, our students still live in the reality of an America in which the pressures of simply being are not equal. It is of utmost importance to understand the story of every student so that we can provide the support, curriculum, and environment that enables every child to know that they belong in their classroom. Correcting for outside factors is challenging, as it can't be done in a solely top-down manner. We need to create avenues of functional communication so that our leadership can better understand all members of our community.

Internally, there are some practices we need to address to make success more achievable for all students. We are in one of the top districts in the state, which is why many of us moved here. This promise of elite schools has come with increased competition and pressure. Many families are able to supplement their children's education, but that should not establish our baseline of success or how placement in gifted programs is determined. Our evaluation of success must be inclusive.

    b. **What proposals do you have for reducing these achievement disparities and poor academic performance outcomes?**

Unfortunately, there are not clear-cut policies that will alleviate the achievement gap with any certainty. For example, two institutions put forth in the 2015 Excellence with Equity report as

models of inclusion and equity (Portland City Schools, and Taft High School in Cincinnati) have not had sustained success in addressing inequity. But what can we take from their attempts to inform our own growth without letting cynicism set in?

Regardless of any plan we develop regarding instruction practices, curricular changes, or testing measures, the most important variable we have to work with is how we reach the entirety of our community. I firmly believe that strong practices of shared governance and sustained community engagement are the building blocks for equity. Without this, any plan can fail. We should establish new processes of inclusion that promotes the voices of our community to leadership in a more functional way. Regardless of what policies we adopt next, they are likely to create a similar status quo unless all communities are legitimately engaged in the process.

    c. **In what ways should our school system be evaluated according to its ability to reduce these disparities?**

I generally take issue with curriculum building and standardized testing regimes that determine a student's success/ability when the test may not represent the population. As a teacher, growth is often the factor that helps me know if a child is succeeding in my classroom. Unfortunately, this can be subjective and is hard to build a system of evaluation around. While some standardized testing can help us understand legitimate aspects of a school's effectiveness, I would like to see better metric of growth that better communicate to students how they are doing. The gobbledygook of acronyms and testing jargon can make communicating student progress unintelligible. I have personally had meetings regarding a report card where I left wondering… so is my child doing well or not? Should I be worried or not? Clarity in our measures is also essential.

    d. **Which group, students, teachers or administrators, is most responsible for current academic achievement outcomes in CHCCS? Why?**

Because our current measures of student success seem to be impacted so strongly by external factors such as race, wealth, and supplemental educational opportunities, I believe that the primary responsibility for academic achievement falls onto students. This is not a good thing for all students, and it is definitely not their fault. For some students, this responsibility is aided heavily by opportunities provided by their family, enabling them to better compete. Other students do not have these opportunities, which places the challenge of school more squarely on their shoulders. I think that we need to better account for the different challenges our students face in their lives, across all measures of diversity, to better spread the burden of responsibility across stake holders in the system.

2. **Data show that each year, students of color in CHCCS, and particularly Black students, are disproportionately subject to both short and long-term suspensions (e.g., in 2016-2017, Black students in CHCCS were 13.9 times more likely to receive a short-term suspension than White students, and 5.6 times more likely to be referred to a juvenile**

delinquency court)[2]. While racial disproportionality in discipline is prevalent across the nation, the NC relative rate index of Black student short-term suspensions compared to White students is 4.4, again one of the largest racial inequities in the state.
   a. What is your explanation for the large disproportionate discipline rate in our district?
   b. What proposals do you have for reducing these disparities?

The short answer is that Black students are both policed and disciplined to a higher standard than their fellow students. There are many reasons for this, the most of which involve the biases against Black persons that exist across American society.

The first step is to acknowledge that this issue stems from a long history of unequal treatment. Alongside values of personal responsibility, we need to make sure that concepts of justice and equal protection are a part of any discipline proceeding. Most importantly, it is essential to revisit our Code of Conduct to make sure punishments fit the behavior we are trying to change. Misbehavior can't be treated with the same force as a crime, especially considering the impact this can have on a student's future.

3. The Racial Equity Impact Assessment was recommended as a tool to guide the district's decision-making about current policy and new initiatives. What are your views about the usefulness of this tool for our district? What aspects of the tool do you think are most important?

REIAs appear to provide a strong framework for developing systems of equity in our district. It can't be seen as a solution as much as a step in the right direction, though. Giving lip service to the concepts of a REIA could actually increase inequity, while rigidity around any assessment could create unintended consequences. I think that the first 2 steps in the REIA, identifying and engaging stakeholders, are the most vital for any progress in this area. Any changes we make must come from respectful engagement from community members affected. Without that as a starting point, any well-intentioned plan is destined to fail.

4. Have you attended Racial Equity Institute (REI) training or any other racial equity trainings in the past three years? (Note: This training is not the same as diversity or cultural competence training.) If so, what have been your key "lessons learned" about how to approach racial inequities in our school system?

I have! I am fortunate to have attended multiple training sessions over the past couple of years. I have to give credit to the tireless work of our Student Life department at NCSSM who have organized multiple training sessions for our faculty and staff. In particular, I've received Groundwater Training from the REI as well as a session by We Are on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The most important lessons, aside from simply accepting the reality of the world

around me, was the value of making every student feel like their school is meant for them. If a child doesn't believe that, for whatever reason, it increases the challenge dramatically for them to succeed. Every student must see their place in a classroom and themselves in the curriculum. I know what it feels like to belong in school. Without that feeling, that inclusion, a child has to be much more impressive than I've ever been to do well academically.

Academic Tracking and Special Programs for Academically/Intellectually Gifted

1. **Please provide your assessment of the LEAP program, as conceived and as currently implemented.**

As conceived, I think LEAP is the type of program an elite school district does well. Identifying talent and fostering it is something we should look to do. From my exposure, LEAP is a fantastic opportunity for those selected. As implemented, things get a little trickier for LEAP.

As we all know, the metrics for identifying talent are imperfect and can be skewed by providing supplementary training for students. While there is nothing wrong with a parent providing additional support for their child, I want to make sure our LEAP selection is quantifying student ability rather than externalities. There are many students who have absolutely earned their way into LEAP, including those who have received additional help to get in, but we need to make sure we develop a selection mechanism that is more weighted towards student work, engagement, and interest.

2. **What is your opinion about other initiatives that sort and divide children into academically and intellectually gifted in elementary and middle school and into "Honors" vs. "Standard" in high school?**

As with LEAP, sorting and dividing students by ability is perfectly fine as long as the selection criteria are fair and all groups are challenged regardless of placement. But that is the problem. Too many factors external to the classroom are impacting placement. My goal would be to have every student engaged and challenged regardless of what their category is called. Most importantly, all levels of instruction and the students in them have to be treated with respect. Our students should not feel shame for not being in a gifted class considering the non-academic factors contributing to placement. Likewise, we need to do a better job conveying the strength of our instruction at all levels to colleges and employers. We have allowed competition for so-called "elite" classes to diminish the achievements of students in other classes.

Faculty/Staff Diversity & Equity

1. **Please provide your assessment of the current state of CHCCS faculty and staff diversity. Do you think faculty and staff diversity is important? Please discuss why, or why not. If you see room for improvement in faculty and staff diversity, what specific proposals do you have to address the issue?**

An important factor in helping a student feel like their school is made for them is to see adults who look like them in positions of leadership and mentorship. This especially holds true for teachers as their impact on students is unique and personal. As a teacher, many of my efforts go towards convincing students that I am there for them and am an adult they can trust. This doesn't just happen, and every factor helps. For some students, having shared experiences in equity (or inequity) is essential for building this trust. Based upon the Racial Equity Report Card, CHCCS is doing well in some aspects of diversity, but poorly on others. Our proportion of Black faculty is strong, while our Hispanic and Asian communities are not well represented. Much of this is due to our changing demographics over the past 2 decades, but we still need to aspire to bringing in teachers and administrators that better match our students.

2. **List possible faculty/staff equity-related policies or best practices that could be introduced and implemented in CHCCS to improve outcomes?**

I am a big proponent of a shared governance model in education. In this model, various stake holders (faculty, staff, and students/parents) play important roles in determining the academic program of the institution through delegated authority from administrators. While we already have many aspects of this installed, we should look to build more avenues for these stake holders to communicate effectively and in a timely manner. This has proven to improve many aspects of employment at NCSSM in relation to equity and would serve CHCCS well.

Dual Language Programs

1. **Please provide your assessment of our school system's dual language programs.**
   a. **How do the District's dual language programs help to *improve* inequities in academic achievement?**

Our dual language programs are examples of what top school districts strive to create. While quite different from each other, our Spanish and Chinese dual language programs offer students a style of learning that can be absolute springboards for success. Especially in the Spanish program, this provides significant support to students for whom English is not the language spoken at home. I think these programs build bridges between communities and across cultures.

It should be made clear that these programs often provide a voice for communities that are often ignored. For instance, the Chinese community of our district is shown significant disrespect by how they are stripped of their identity. Not only is this community lumped into a broad category of Asian (an issue shared by Hispanic communities), but they are also often lumped into the White community for reports parsed by race. This is a disservice to not only the Chinese community, but other communities represented by a simplistic racial label. The Chinese Dual language program is not meant to serve this community alone, but the lack of diversity matching our district in this program is a serious issue keeping the program from reaching its true potential.

b. **How do dual language programs *contribute* to inequities in academic achievement?**

I think most contributions to inequity by these programs occurs through issues of which populations apply to participate. In the Spanish program, there is sometimes a discernable difference in the educational and financial backgrounds between many of the English and Spanish speaking families. Diversity within these populations would be ideal. In the Chinese program, the Black and Hispanic communities are virtually absent amongst the program. We should absolutely look to increase the diversity of the student body for this program. Underrepresentation of several student populations should be addressed, which needs to start with increasing applications across our district.

c. **How can dual language programs, in their current state and resource allocation, help to close the achievement gap?**

I feel that one strong benefit these programs provide is that they help form strong educational communities with shared purpose. This increases a sense of inclusion for students, which can also increase the belief that they truly belong. While I don't personally think that closing the achievement gap is the purpose of dual language programs per se, I do believe that that these programs will help towards that end.

d. **If unsuccessful in meeting metrics for closing the achievement gap, should resources allocated toward dual language programs be diverted to other programs with greater potential and a demonstrated track record in addressing inequities in achievement? Why or why not?**

While I think that addressing the achievement gap within a program is important, I do not support removing significant resources from the dual language programs for this purpose. I think these are programs that help define our district as elite as these opportunities are not limited to elite students. Our goal should be to diminish the achievement and opportunity gaps so that all of our programs, from LEAP, gifted, and honors classes to the dual language programs, are utilized equitably. I do not want for these programs to be compromised or lost before underrepresented communities benefit from them too.

School Safety

1. **Please provide your assessment of our current school safety plan, and its implementation.**
   a. **What are your biggest concerns regarding school safety?**

As a teacher who has been through numerous lockdown drills and several actual lockdowns, I have to say that I am sad that this generation of kids will equate school with a risk of massacre. The likelihood of a shooting is minute, but that chance is still terrifying as Carrboro Elementary

parents know well. This will prove to be exceptionally harmful to the psyche of our children, even though preparation for the unthinkable is the responsible thing to do. But this is not our biggest threat.

In the context of our schools, it does come down to mental health. Times are tough for today's kids with pressures of college admissions, potential school debt, social media, vaping addiction, global climate change, and school shootings weighing in on top of what is already there for the teenage mind to contemplate. These pressures will not always manifest in an outward spasm of violence, as many of our kids harm themselves in response. Much of this harm can also manifest in a significant lack of sleep and a dearth of exercise. We need to see that the mental health of our students is the largest threat to their long-term health and safety.

      b. Describe the role of School Resource Officers in our elementary through high schools.

I am in favor of SROs protecting the education community from outside threats and significant breaches of the law inside the schools. However, SROs need to understand the role of the school in applying discipline comes before law enforcement. If a student matter can be solved by the school, that is as far as it should go.

      c. Do you believe that School Resource Officers should be armed? Why or why not? If yes, please describe the type of weapon.

I am comfortable with SROs being armed as that is what we have at NCSSM, but I am very open to input. We have armed Durham police officers on our campus as well as unarmed security guards. The Durham police do not play a visible role in the day to day life of our students while the unarmed security guards are more visible. The main reason for my comfort is that the security guards are a part of our community. Our students know them and engage them. Without this connection, it would make our security team seem like they were policing the students rather than protecting them. It doesn't always work this way at other schools and students of color have legitimate concerns towards the role law enforcement plays in school discipline.

      d. What concrete changes in school safety policy would you like to see?

Expectations for how SROs integrate into a school's disciplinary system must be reviewed to ensure that law enforcement is not being misused. Enforcing these boundaries strictly should be the norm.

We need to treat the mental health of our students as a significant safety issue, both direct and indirect. This is also an issue completely separate of school shootings. Too many of our kids are really hurting and for many reasons. We need more mental health counsellors so that we can better address the increasing needs of our students.

Community Engagement

1. **What changes would you suggest in how the school system communicates with parents and other community stakeholders?**
   a. **Please provide your assessment of current levels of transparency and the integrity of process in CHCCS decision-making. In what ways should transparency and accountability to the community be improved?**

If you like to go to multi-hour meetings or stream them from home, then we are pretty transparent in CHCCS as far as board-level decision making is concerned. However, this is not a sustainable model of communication with the public. We should look to make access to usable information easier, through emails and the website. Additionally, we should look to include more formal discussions at Board meetings with representatives of stake holder groups throughout the community. For instance, a rotating representative from each SIT and PTA across the district should be asked to participate more formally at Board meetings.

   b. **In what ways can the school board better promote student engagement in school system governance? What are you doing to engage students and student voice in your campaign?**

I think that students should have a seat at the Board in some fashion. While this is too big a burden for a single student, we could consider rotating through the student leadership across the district. The student voice (as well as that of faculty and staff) is essential for us to do our jobs well.

How would you characterize our school system's readiness to ensure a full and accurate count in the upcoming census?

To be honest, I have no idea as I'm not familiar with our infrastructure for this. If a citizenship question appears on the census, I can see significant undercounts, which could be catastrophic for us. I'm not sure if we are able to provide guidance or avenues for legal advice to families concerned about the makeup of the census. I'm not sure if we have any legal recourse if we suspect an undercount. Regardless, we should develop strategies for remedying an undercount proactively.

Budgeting

1. **What should be the priorities for the CHCCS's 2020-2021 budget?**
   a. **In what ways would they differ from 2019-2020 budget priorities?**
   b. **How would you re-prioritize current programs?**
   c. **What other changes would you like to see in the budgeting process?**

We have suffered a significant loss of funding with the change in priorities of the Thrift Shop. This puts a larger burden of our PTAs to fill this gap and makes our budget asks even more critical. We must communicate the role and strengths of our PTAs more strongly. They need us as much as we need them.

Despite our tax rates and reputation as an elite district, our facilities are unacceptable on the whole. Some schools are being renovated, but just about every building in the district is out of date. We need to effectively advocate to our County Commissioners for an allocation that serves our community better.

I believe that we should put money towards programs that level the playing field amongst students in regards to external factors. In particular, I would like to ensure that every child begins class with a full belly, has regular exercise, access to engaging after school programs, and access to resources needed to meet the minimum requirements of our district.

As far as changes to the budget, I will readily admit that I am a not a budget expert. I look forward to engaging the district's staff as I learn more about why they make their choices, how these choices will impact student equity, and how they will affect student mental health.