

Weslyn Mather – Ward H – Edmonton Public School District

1. What specific steps would you advocate to improve the quality of education?

We must bring a focus on excellence back to Edmonton Public Schools. We must ensure adequate support for teachers, and for teachers who are asked to take on students with special needs we need to ensure required resources and classroom aids, time, and skill development are provided. We need to require that everything we do is focussed on ensuring excellence in our schools and providing an environment to promote student success and well-being, and to ensure that this is a shared vision among staff, parents and the community. I will also try to ensure that we work with Boards across the province to speak with unity about adequate, predictable and sustainable funding and more independence for school boards to meet community needs and expectations. We have the power to speak clearly about our needs, and I will be there to be a voice for parents, students and teachers. I would work toward a renewed focus on improving high school retention rates. We need to ensure that students have all the support they need and are able to access the resources they need to become contributing members of our society. For example, each high school student should have routine meetings with a counselor to assess grades and progress, to deal with obstacles that may be interfering with schooling, and to suggest ways to align their education with their career aspirations. I would also propose a review of ways of making high school education more relevant or responsive to the needs of our young people, including a review of programs relating to job training and apprenticeship programs. Early intervention will also make a difference when needs are recognized and supports put in place.

2. What are the main directions we need to take to develop the full potential of all students?

Firstly, to ensure that optimal teaching learning conditions are available in every classroom. This means we need to work toward having sufficient funding to ensure appropriate class sizes, to ensure adequate teaching and learning resources are available, to ensure that we make effective use of technology not only as a teaching and learning tool but also as a means of providing for effective home – school communication. Secondly, we need to continue with work begun in the past to make all of our schools safe and caring places and to reduce and eliminate bullying of all kinds. In that context I propose a new policy on sexual orientation and gender identity to ensure support and assistance for students going through an identity crisis or who may be experiencing bullying. This is a positive and necessary step in the process of providing a high quality education and a safe learning environment for all students. Thirdly, we need to review the role of testing and assessment and ensure that the focus on test results does not detract from other very important outcomes and that teacher creativity is encouraged. Fourthly we must provide ongoing and strong support for the arts and for language development. And finally, we need to inspire and empower both students and staff. Let's give staff the trust and power to make decisions that are appropriate for their schools – site-based decision-making. I believe in encouraging more collaborative planning and instruction, and also in providing appropriate and necessary professional development opportunities so that our teachers are at the best of their abilities.

3. Please indicate if you strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree or have no opinion on the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No opinion
Schools currently have enough specialized staff and resources to develop the full potential of all students.		X			
Increased class sizes will hurt the high school completion rate.				X	
The board should provide support for community schools rather than expanding alternative programs.					
The school board should make sure that students with special needs should be provided additional supports.				X	
School boards should work with the provincial government to assure access to early childhood education and quality before and after school care programs.				X	
School boards should advocate for the Alberta government to fully fund junior kindergarten and full-day kindergarten as recommended by the Alberta Commission on Learning.				X	
School boards should advocate for the Learning Commission recommendation on class sizes at all grade levels.				X	
School boards should advocate for renewed emphasis on the arts, trades and language learning in their schools.				X	
School boards should advocate for appropriate programs and supports for ESL students.				X	

1. What are the most important changes that need to be made regarding the role of school boards in Alberta?

I would work toward a renewed effort to ensure sufficient, stable and predictable funding. Edmonton Public Schools can take a leadership role here to work with Boards from across the province on this. The recent budget cuts add an extra challenge to boards across the province and are not in the best interests of our students, our schools, and our future. In this context we must ensure efficient and responsible use of tax-payer dollars through the budget process. I would also work to restore taxing power to local boards and to ensure they have sufficient independence in decision making to serve and be responsive to local needs. I believe moves in this direction would not only improve the ability of boards to provide the very best education possible, but would also make them more responsive and accountable to the community. In this context school board policies must be made with the needs of the community in mind. Broader engagement – with school councils, community groups, parents, government – is key.

2. How can the school board and you as trustee most effectively influence the financial and policy decisions made by the provincial ministry of education?

We need a renewed effort to work with the provincial government to ensure sufficient, stable and predictable funding. Edmonton Public Schools can take a leadership role here to work with Boards from across the province on this. The budget cuts add an extra challenge to boards across the province and are not in the best interests of our students, our schools, and our future. Secondly I would work to ensure regular ongoing communication with MLA's and with the Minister. I would also encourage parents who have concerns to express their opinions in effective ways, and to become more involved in school councils and even Board meetings.

3. Please indicate if you strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree or have no opinion on the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No opinion
A trustee must be a team player and always defend the decisions of the board, even if the trustee disagrees with those decisions.				X	
All business of the board should be dealt with in open public sessions except when the board is required to protect the privacy of employees or students.				X	
Trustees should actively consult with constituents and school councils on important policy matters.				X	
At times, school boards need to take more active public stands on education issues, even if it means being critical of the provincial government.				X	
The provincial government has seriously undermined the power and authority of trustees and school boards.					X

1. In light of the current funding situation, what strategies should the board use to meet the needs of students and the community?

Facing the reality of reduced revenues for the present, we must continue to use our resources wisely and with care to minimize the impact on students. This means we must work on ways of reducing the costs, including central office costs. We need closer monitoring of budgets and spending to ensure no unnecessary spending occurs and to ensure that available resources are focussed on our students. At the same time, I believe we have an obligation to respect contracts that are in place, and to demonstrate how much we value the highly skilled and dedicated teaching staff we have.

2. What changes respecting the funding of education would you advocate for?

I would advocate ongoing and strong appeals to the provincial government to restore funding to ensure our resources are adequate to meet our educational goals. This effort would include face to face meetings with Edmonton MLA's and the Minister. It would also include working with Boards across the province to mobilize province wide support for this effort, and also working with parents and other interested groups. I also favour working for the restoration of the Board's ability to generate its own tax revenue for a portion of our budget, a move that would improve our ability to ensure adequate funding and which would also increase the level of accountability of the Board to the community.

3. Please indicate if you strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree or have no opinion on the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No opinion
Education is adequately funded. School boards can live within their means by "cutting fat".		X			
If a school board cannot balance its budget without harmful cuts to education programs, it should be prepared to run a deficit.				X	
Provincial funding for building and maintaining schools is adequate.		X			
Provincial funding should be sufficient to cover increases to teacher and staff contracts.				X	

1. Should the provincial government continue to use Public Private Partnerships (P3s) for building new schools, what guidelines would you propose be placed on P3 contracts?

I have concerns about whether P3's are ultimately in our interest. They add an extra cost, and that is the cost of profit for whatever they may be involved in. This means that any money saved has to come from somewhere and we need to be convinced that the savings do not come at the expense of things we value or result in greater costs over the long term. P3's need to be looked at very closely to ensure they are an effective tool. For example, if a private contractor is engaged to construct a school and then lease it back to the Board, what are the implications for long term costs, for the ability of the Board to make decisions about renovations, about the timeliness and appropriateness of maintenance? In general I do not favour turning schools into profit making opportunities for private interests.

2. What limitations, if any, should the school board place on the involvement of private firms in schools?

I'm in favour of such involvement as long as it is in the best interests of the school and the students, and is not designed to be a means by which the private firm promotes its own interests. There can be benefits from such partnerships, but each one needs to be negotiated to ensure that there is a net benefit for the school, and that there is no undue influence on school policies and practices. Our schools must maintain their independence.

3. Please indicate if you strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree or have no opinion on the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No opinion
Private sector businesses can operate schools more cheaply and efficiently and should be allowed to do so.		X			
The financing, construction and maintenance of a school should be undertaken as a public private partnership.		X			
Parents should be expected to contribute towards the cost of their children's education by paying school fees and fundraising.		X			
School boards should ban commercial advertising in schools.		X			
Students should be provided with all necessary books and learning materials at no cost.				X	
The public interest is best served by schools that are publicly owned and operated.				X	
To address funding shortfalls, schools should be allowed to have corporate sponsors, including naming rights.		X			

1. What reasons, if any, might you vote for the closure of a school?

Given the rapid growth of the city and the ongoing need for new schools in an environment of reduced funding, we must just as in the past, look at how to make the most effective use of our buildings. In the past the school has been a focal point of the community, and this should be recognized as much as possible. In some cases this means that in addition to housing classrooms, a school may also be a community centre providing a home to other community services, and that surplus space can be leased out. This can help to maintain the viability of a school. At the same time we need to recognize that larger schools may have the ability to provide a broader program and a wider range of resources for students and teachers. A school closure should be a last resort, and it is in that context that I recognize that there may be a need to close schools from time to time. Such decisions should involve the local parent community and parents to ensure there is adequate debate and consideration given to all factors and to provide assurances to parents that the Board will do its best to accommodate parental concerns. I also think that there should be flexibility in the application of utilization formulas to allow for special or exceptional circumstances. For example, there may be situations where a small community school is the best way to meet student needs.

2. Please indicate if you strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree or have no opinion on the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No opinion
Additional government funding should be provided to address the infrastructure deficit.			X		
Community schools with small enrolments should be closed so that larger schools can offer more programs.			X		
The school board should work with the province to provide wrap around services in schools.			X		
Some schools should be closed so that the province will build new schools in new neighbourhoods.			X		
Schools are a part of the community and should be open to other community activities.			X		
Boards should advocate for changing the province's school utilization formula to account for space used in after school care and other community uses.			X		