

FairfaxCAPS Interviews Candidates for Virginia 37th District Senatorial Seat

Steve Hunt and David Marsden are candidates running for Virginia 37th District Senatorial seat, replacing the open seat vacated by Ken Cuccinelli. The election will be held on January 12, 2010. In separate interviews, FairfaxCAPS asked each candidate nine school related questions. The questions and each candidate's answers are listed in table format below.

FairfaxCAPS performed these interviews for the purpose of providing citizens with information about each candidate's positions in relationship to public school system issues that are under the authority of the Virginia General Assembly. We hope this information offers another dimension in determining the best candidate for the senatorial seat.

FairfaxCAPS would like to thank both candidates Steve Hunt and David Marsden for agreeing to be interviewed by FairfaxCAPS. Citizens in the 37th Senate District can make their voices heard by voting on Election Day, January 12, 2010.

About FairfaxCAPS

FairfaxCAPS, established by community leaders, is a platform where citizens and groups can come together to identify common concerns and to share and discuss information about our schools in a collaborative manner. By utilizing the resources and talents of those in our community to examine educational issues, FairfaxCAPS provides an effective voice for parents and other community members to advocate for educational opportunities, accountability, and fiscal responsibility in the Fairfax County Public Schools. We welcome all in the community to join us in advancing the cause of educational excellence for all of the children of Fairfax County.

FarifaxCAPS Questions	Steve Hunt's Responses	Dave Marsden's Responses
Is state funding of local education adequate?	"The amount of state education funding is sufficient but how it is allocated to localities is not equitable. The more important issue is how the funds are utilized by local school systems."	"No, state education funding is not adequate. The percentage of state funds allocated to education should be pegged against the Mid-Atlantic states average. Currently, the percent allocation is based on the average for Southern states, which is lower."
Do local governments have enough oversight, including budgetary oversight, over local school systems?	"It is the school board's responsibility to oversee the school system and budget. We currently have want-based budgets instead of needs-based budgets because school boards do not have the visibility into the budget or a means to tie dollars to improvement. I will introduce legislation proposing all government bodies must post their budget and disbursements on-line in a manner that can be downloaded into an Excel-like format. This will provide better financial visibility for both the school boards and the citizens. I will also work with the State Department of Education to influence the development of true measures of effectiveness."	"In the overall sense, yes. State and local government set the amount of education funds a school board has to spend. School boards have to decide how the funds are spent."

What is your position regarding public school choice within a county or throughout the state?

"There should be a more open enrollment and options for parents within school systems. I plan to work with Delegate-elect LeMunyon on a bill that would allow students to enroll in the school of their choice within their city or county as long as there is room and the parents provide the transportation. We need to leverage the same power of competition that gives us great drama, music and athletic programs to improve our academics. We need a measurement of excellence to measure the success in schools against the challenge of that school's environment that is not a minimum standard like the SOLs or a bar to cross but a means to determine the best schools in the district or county. The top schools would be recognized and rewarded. If you raise the bar students will strive to meet the expectations and so will the schools."

"It depends on the situation of the county. For example, if it is for charter schools then you must first determine how you will make up for the funding to support charter schools. Will existing public schools be closed?"

<p>Due to the current downturn in the economy, what do you think should be the educational focus with the limited available funds?</p>	<p>"Schools must focus on the academic fundamentals of reading, writing and mathematics. I told one of my former school board colleagues that they should draw a circle around all classrooms (regular, special-ed, etc.) and protect them. Cuts should come from everywhere else before any consideration is made to make cuts in the classroom. I told The Washington Post that the School Board should empty Gatehouse I before they go after the classroom."</p>	<p>"The best way to begin looking at this process is reducing expenditures by backing-out program increases in reverse order - last approved program is first to be eliminated. While this is a good place to start, decisions will have to be made based off specific program results - for example, important programs like special education need to be protected."</p>
<p>Should legislation be proposed to increase the level of oversight/control the Board of Supervisors has over education spending?</p>	<p>"No, this is the school board's responsibility. If they are not doing their jobs, fire them - vote them out."</p>	<p>"This is the jurisdiction of the local governmental authority."</p>

<p>Is state funding allocated fairly among localities?</p>	<p>“State funds are not fairly allocated to the counties, especially Fairfax county because of the higher cost of living.”</p>	<p>“No, state funding is not fairly allocated among localities. Fairfax County has a high cost of doing business in the metropolitan area, compared to the rest of the state. This higher cost of doing business is not considered in the formula for the allocation of funds. Therefore, Fairfax is not receiving its fair share of funding.”</p>
<p>Do you believe Fairfax County should be able to keep a greater portion of its tax revenue for its schools and, if so, what actions would you support to achieve this?</p>	<p>“No. We need to include a cost of living factor into the allocation of funds. I will develop relationships and partner with legislators in the other high cost of living areas around the state to develop a voting block to change the funding allocation formula. I will also try to convince other representatives that it is in their best interest to support such legislation because it will ultimately enable northern Virginia to continue to generate large revenues through its thriving economic engine.”</p>	<p>“Yes, I believe that Fairfax should get a greater portion of its tax revenue for its schools. I can enter legislation proposing an increase in Fairfax County's funding allocation, but it will be more effective to advocate for an increase in direct state aid to specific programs that benefit Fairfax County.”</p>

<p>Does the General Assembly and/or the Virginia Department of Education need to establish clearer guidelines for when school districts can use alternative assessment tests in lieu of SOL tests?</p>	<p>“Yes. It is critical that the state establish clear guidelines when school districts can use alternative assessments. These tests are subjective and should only be used when the regular assessment methods cannot be used. Fairfax County is obviously stretching the use of these assessment tools beyond the limits of how these were intended to be applied. This ultimately is harmful to the children because there is not a valid assessment as to how effective the program is meeting their needs.”</p>	<p>“Yes. Clear standard guidelines need to be developed and applied consistently.”</p>
<p>Should school systems have independent financial auditors/inspector generals?</p>	<p>“Yes, the school board should be able to hire an independent auditor to perform a financial review. While hiring an additional administrative position in these economic times may be hard to justify, I believe that this would be cost effective in the long run if the Board would have the fortitude to allow the auditor to ask the hard questions, and review the budget compared to the disbursements. It would be critical that the individual is hired by and reports to the School Board and not the school staff.”</p>	<p>“Local government, not the school board, should hire independent financial auditors to review the school board’s budget and accounting system.”</p>