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Cc:
Subject: Asheville City School board

Dear Mayor Manheimer, Vice-mayor Wisler, and Council-members Smith, Haynes, Kapoor, Young, and Mayfield:

I'm writing to encourage you to choose Pepi Acebo for appointment to the board of education for Asheville City Schools.

I met Pepi when our children both attended Hall Fletcher Elementary, and I have been in many school-related meetings in which he was also present. We both served as volunteers for Read to Succeed. My experiences with Pepi leave me no doubt of his commitment to a school system that works for everyone, especially our most underserved students.Â

During my son's time at Hall Fletcher I was actively involved in the PTO, and I volunteered weekly in the classroom for years until I was hired in a temporary position as library assistant. I also worked as a substitute teacher at Hall Fletcher and the preschool (now Asheville Primary School). As a resident of the east-end of West Asheville, and as an educator now employed at UNCA, I care a great deal about education in our community. When my son completed fourth grade at Hall Fletcher, we made the painful decision to pull him out of the school in order to preserve his mental health and his engagement with learning. Throughout our time at ACS he struggled to adapt to an environment that often provoked intense anxiety, which was unable to differentiate for learning needs rooted in neurodivergence, and which eventually caused him to shut down and disengage from academics. We hope to return to ACS for high school. Many families are unable to access alternative educational options, so it is imperative that we continue to work toward a school system in which all children may thrive.

A big part of the reason that teachers may have been unable to adapt to meet the diverse needs of their students is because they were constantly adapting to structural or curricular changes implemented by upper level administration. Teachers would be moved from one grade and then to another. New curriculum was assigned that they had to use for every student, regardless of need, and in less than ten years, Hall Fletcher is on its third principal (and ACS on its third superintendent). I saw immensely talented and dedicated teachers become disheartened and leave the system or move into non-teaching positions. How do you do your job well when next year everything changes? That instability generates anxiety which permeates the environment, and sensitive children most certainly pick up on it. And for children who have been through trauma, such stress is disastrous for their learning. Our most vulnerable children are particularly in need of stability.

Pepi understands this. He publicly shared his replies to the questionnaire for his application for the board position, and in response to the question about innovation he stated "Asheville City Schools does not have a problem with lack of innovation. We do struggle with lack of continuity in programs and leadership, and with retention. We struggle with prematurely abandoning innovation without seeing through implementation, without fine-tuning of the implementation, and, at times, without waiting for initial results."Â He is exactly right, and we need school board members to hold administrators to accountability measures without demanding immediate results.

When the process to find a new superintendent began, I attended a meeting at Hall Fletcher focused on gathering feedback from the ACS community on what qualities we wanted in candidates for that position. Many teachers and parents expressed our desire for a leader that would make decisions rooted in community input. ACS continues its top-down decision making approach, as we can see in the conflict over the ball field happening right now at Vance. Hall Fletcher's

balanced calendar was popular with the community, and parents from other schools hoped it would become the standard. Results of public surveys in favor of keeping the year-round school calendar were disregarded and the program canceled. As a member of the school board, Pepi would be a strong voice for community-based (opposed to unilateral) decision making.Â

Indeed, strengthening our community describes his proposed response to our city's dismal lack of racial equity. More pressure or strategies to raise test scores will not resolve these issues. In his reply to Question 2 of the survey, Pepi describes a holistic, community-centered approach. I'm confident he will advocate for solutions that are generated by the community, programs which are likely to have a greater benefit than curriculum designed to improve test scores. How can any plan to foster equity not begin by listening and responding to the needs and insights expressed by our African American students and their families? "Whatever you do for me, but without me, you do against me" (attributed to Gandhi).Â

In all the meetings I've attended when Pepi has been present, I've noted that he is an excellent listener whose contributions to discussions are thoughtfully considered. He's been actively engaged in work to benefit equitable education of Asheville's youth, and will be an asset to our community with a role on theÂ school board.Â

Thank you,

Kristin Marsh Shepard
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I don't want a happy ending, I want more story. -- Frances Hardinge