

2026 Ferndale Public Schools School Board Candidate Questionnaire

Jessica Newman

1. What experiences have led you to run/rerun for school board?

I have dedicated my career to advancing civil rights and fighting for social justice through political and labor organizing, policy advocacy, community organizing, and electoral campaign work, and I currently serve as the co-director of the Michigan Education Justice Coalition. I bring a career's worth of direct labor and legislative organizing and serve on the advisory committee of a statewide coalition fighting for equitable public investment in things like our infrastructure and public goods and services - especially our public schools. My career started in child advocacy work, specifically improving our foster care system and advocating for the wraparound services and supports like food assistance, healthcare, transportation, and mental health services our families and communities need to thrive. These experiences showed me that high quality education programs and services are critical in the first few years of a child's development, and that policy and governance must address community needs, in addition to specific supports for our kids, in order to lay the most solid foundation for their future.

I currently serve as Secretary of the Ferndale School Board, an appointed position I've held since October 2025, and a position which I applied to fill for the community because I believe our public schools are the foundation of a thriving community. The vacancy was announced in the midst of my involvement as campaign manager of the Invest in MI Kids initiative - a campaign to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot to impose a tax on the 1% in Michigan to raise over \$1.7 billion for our public schools across the state. Through my work on this campaign, I learned more about our state's broken K-12 funding system, including the fact that our public schools are underfunded by over \$4.5 billion per year. This number comes from a study conducted by economists and education policy experts at MSU who analyzed what it would take for our schools to be fully funded to provide a base level of instruction, services, and supports to students of all backgrounds and in every corner of the state. These dollars are used to recruit and retain teachers and paraprofessionals, to expand student opportunities by providing a variety of career and technical education opportunities, to support our special needs learners, and to ensure all kids receive the individualized instruction they deserve. Prior to the Invest in MI Kids campaign, I played a central role in the campaign to pass the 2025 Ferndale Schools Bond, leading the canvass and public education campaign to secure much needed local funding to improve our aging facilities. Through these experiences, I learned the critical gaps in our local, state, and federal education policies, and I also got to see first hand how critical school boards are as a line of defense and proactive support for our students, teachers, and full public school community. It was this experience, coupled with my many years in child and labor policy advocacy that inspired me to raise my hand and apply for the vacancy.

2. What do you see are the strengths and weaknesses of Ferndale Public Schools?

In the year that I have been on the board, I have been heartened to see how incredibly lucky we are in Ferndale to have a committed parent and school community, and wonderful leadership team that truly cares about our district's success. I think our staff, admin, and community are some of our biggest strengths. We are a district that provides a wide variety of learning opportunities to our community - from partnerships with OCC and OTEC to learn about the culinary arts and emerging technologies, to our world class robotics teams, performing arts, and athletics programs. We have also invested in ensuring our students across the district feel a strong sense of belonging, specifically trying our best to measure at every grade level and in each building whether our students feel safe, seen, and empowered. I have seen this at the building level, with University High School creating a strong and beloved identity and community among our students, and with our district wide efforts to keep Superintendent Hibbler in touch with and accessible to all families through community engagement like Soup with the Supe. This commitment is also reflected in our administration's move to an equitable grading system, and in the investments we are making in our school facilities, like our brand new athletic fields and high school auditorium.

In terms of our weaknesses, we have growing in district enrollment, which is hugely positive!, but that means strain on our small and aging facilities. As a district that exists in a small city, we will continue to need to sustainably and responsibly invest in upgrading our facilities and to find appropriate places to manage our growth as a district. One test of this will be our need to accommodate our middle school students as we complete our construction of the new middle/high school facility next school year. I am confident we will provide an appropriate and high quality learning environment that will also position the district to expand our facilities for the future.

Moreover, I know that screen time in the classroom is a major issue of concern for our students, parents, and staff. We must ensure that our students are benefitting from the latest developments in proven tools for aiding their learning, while not encouraging overuse of tech and screen time. Our administration in consultation with the board, and after much input from the school community has put forward a technology policy that we will need to be very diligent about monitoring in implementation to ensure efficacy.

In addition, our district is not alone in managing the increased assault on our special education budgets and instruction. Our parent community has been very engaged in educating the board and administration about their experiences navigating our special education system, and what they see as opportunities to work together to improve administration and support for our students and families alike. As a district we are already taking steps to incorporate this feedback and work with our special education leadership to improve how we communicate with and serve our families, and manage an ever declining pot of resources to serve our students.

3. How do you see collaboration between the Ferndale School Board and city governments/ other local stakeholders?

All three levels of government must work together to ensure a fully and fairly funded free appropriate public education to every student. At the local level, the school board sets district wide policies on things like curriculum, resource allocation, and other broad based issues in furtherance of our strategic plan. It is our responsibility as the trustees to ensure our tax dollars are spent in the most effective way possible, with full transparency to the public, and in consultation with the administration, faculty, staff, and the full community.

The board is the public's most direct point of accountability for the district. That means real oversight, like reviewing whether goals like the discipline-gap reduction in our own long term plan are actually being met, and continuing to ask the administration for data that allows us to actually evaluate our progress and the effectiveness of our interventions. Decisions we make at the board level about contracting, staffing, and budget priorities are choices about whether the district treats its staff and lowest-income students as priorities or afterthoughts.

At the state level, Michigan controls the funding formula that determines how much money each district actually has to work with, sets curriculum standards and graduation requirements, licenses educators, and decides big structural questions like whether to expand charter schools or opt into the federal tax credit voucher program. This is also where the most consequential fights over public education funding equity happen, which includes the work I've done co-chairing Fund MI Future, the statewide coalition fighting for equitable public revenue. A school board can advocate and organize toward Lansing, but it can't override state funding decisions on its own, which is exactly why local elected officials need to be engaged in state-level organizing, not just district-level governance. I will continue to partner with allies at the state level to push for full and equitable funding that does not force us into the false choice between better roads or high quality schools, but that grows the economic pie for all parts of our society.

The federal government sets critical baseline civil rights protections like IDEA for students with disabilities and Title IX, and provides supplemental funding streams like Title I. The Federal government is also increasingly threatening public education through initiatives like the OBBBA tax credit voucher program, which uses federal tax policy to divert money toward private schools.

In the year I have been on the board, I have proactively built strong relationships with members of our City Council, our Library Board, and our state level elected officials, in addition to working with broader community organizations and parent groups like the PTA. I have consistently used my role on the local board to build these relationships with our elected officials, recognizing that defending public education requires engagement at every level. Locally, I use my position on the board to make the best possible decisions for our district, while also organizing alongside labor, allied elected officials at the state and federal level to fight for the funding and protections that make it possible to govern effectively in the first instance.

I will continue to be a board member that focuses on stakeholder engagement and community organizing. That means I will continue to attend community meetings across the district and hold regular town halls and community forums on a recurring basis, in accessible locations and at times that work for working families. I have already held a variety of public forums on issues like

school revenue, our important partnership with the Ferndale library, and the impact of surveillance/AI/and Data Centers on our community, and in my full term I am committed to hosting more of these in continued partnership with our local, state, and federal representatives.

I will continue to proactively collaborate with these elected officials to fight for resources and sound policy together. This includes things like fighting for increased revenue sharing at the state level, so our communities see the investments in local infrastructure we need without continuing to add to our significant property tax burden, and crafting legislation like a state facilities bill that will, for the first time, allow districts like Ferndale to draw down state dollars for much needed facilities improvements. Strong relationships are how we continue to provide quality programming for Ferndale families in partnership with our library, and how we will continue to make progress on restoring Kulick as a community hub.

I've spent my career helping workers win power through organizing, legislation, campaigns, and coalition-building. I'll continue to bring that same approach to the board: using the position not just to vote in the interests of our community, but to organize and build coalitions with labor, parents, community groups, and local officials to defend public education as a public good.

4. How do you perceive the relationship among the different schools within FPS?

Ideally each school in our district has a strong relationship and link with each other building, from our Little Eagles at FECC to our FLower community, to FUEL, to the middle school, to University and Ferndale High Schools, to TCEC, we should strive for every single student in every single building to feel a strong sense of community and belonging and pride in their identity as a Ferndale Schools student. It is my goal should I be elected to return to the board to continue to foster strong partnerships between the schools across our district, facilitating shared extra curriculums at the high school level, ensuring that transitions between buildings feel smooth and secure, and fostering that sense of Eagles pride among all students. I also see collaboration amongst our administration and staff in these buildings as an essential part of this, and would use my term to use board policy and oversight to encourage more professional development and opportunities for skills sharing across buildings.

5. Oakland County voters recently voted against a regional school enhancement millage. How does this affect FPS? More generally, what is your experience with budgeting that you bring to this position?

The recent failure of the Oakland County Enhancement Millage, and reductions in funding at the State and Federal level are some of the most urgent crises we face as we look to continue providing a high quality education in the years ahead. Ferndale losing out on over \$1 million in stable revenue every year for the next decade. The vast majority of this revenue - 75% - would have gone directly to an increase in teacher and staff pay and would have given the district the ability to hire more staff. Recruitment and retention of our teachers and staff and lowering the staff to student ratio in each classroom is one of the most powerful ways our district can improve education outcomes for our students. When our teachers and education staff are a steady

presence in the classroom and school buildings, they form deep bonds with students and the broader community, and create a

The failure of this millage also puts us at a huge disadvantage to surrounding counties that have had these millages in place for years. Macomb and Wayne Counties now continue to have access to a reliable and stable funding source that will allow them to attract talent to their school districts that we could otherwise bring in and/or retain in Ferndale. It is critical that our district has the resources we need to retain and attract high quality teachers, paraprofessionals, transportation, and all other staff to create the consistency that our students need and deserve.

That is why one of my top priorities is working alongside our local, state, and federal officials to advocate for full and fair funding of our K-12 schools across the state. This includes rejecting efforts to pit funding for higher education and roads against funding for our K-12 schools. This also means fighting to change state law to make it legal to use state funds for necessary repairs to aging buildings for things like HVAC and classroom modernization, lessening the burden on local taxpayers.

Professionally and through my role as a volunteer for several community organizations, I have managed multi million dollar budgets, accounting for every line item and securing funding to ensure our priorities can be executed. In my role at United for Respect, I designed, led, and managed multimillion dollar budgets for election campaigns, determining where our funds were best used and monitoring how funds were spent, while also remaining nimble and diligent in making adjustments whenever necessary. Additionally, in my current role as Co-Director of the Michigan Education Justice Coalition, it is my responsibility to manage, oversee, draft, and raise funds for our entire organizational budget. I will continue to bring this same attention to detail and prioritization of dollars to be used in the most effective ways in our classrooms to my term on the board.

6. What role does AI (artificial intelligence) and EdTech have in the classrooms of FPS?

Reigning in AI/tech in the classroom is one of my top priorities. This means, striking a balance between preparing our students for a changing society and providing appropriate access and exposure to emerging and following the research on the best environment for learning. As a board member, I am responsible for setting sound policy in collaboration with my board colleagues and with input from staff and the broader community that limits the use of screens and tech so that these technologies are additive to the school environment, and aid learning without replacing instruction. At this point I would advocate we follow NYC's lead and institute a 1 year moratorium on the use of AI in the district in K-8 classrooms until we can get a handle on how it can be ethically deployed. Rising rates of emotional and cognitive deficits in our school aged population can directly be correlated to increased screen time amongst our youngest kids, and decreased interpersonal interactions with adults and peers. We must continue to enforce tech policies that prepare our students for

the world they will be graduating into, while ensuring they are receiving the age appropriate instruction they need to develop critical thinking and speech, and improve social skills and problem solving ability.

Tech Billionaires and their vendors are aggressively pushing the proliferation of tech tools and AI in our public school classrooms. Big Tech should not get to dictate the rules - the community must continue to have the ability to determine the future of technology use in our classrooms. This means clear guidelines set transparently and with community input at the state and local level, so we have a meaningful say in how these tools are used. This includes ensuring AI is never used in deciding things like grades, discipline, or other major decisions.

We need clear policies that provide strong guidelines for educators and students alike that protect student privacy, ensure our educators are equipped with the training they need to use this tech appropriately, and provide for continuous, rigorous oversight of the use of these technologies.

I will use my leadership on the board to fight for strong standards at the local and state level that provide the clear and consistent protections we need to protect our schools and communities.

7. In what ways do you see FPS working toward racial equity?

I am proud that in my almost year in the role we have continued to see a real effort to identify inequities in academic performance and in discipline practices, and obtain the appropriate granular and comparative data to evaluate the success of our interventions, in addition to beginning a shift toward grading practices that will actually measure student achievement and prioritize improving a student's proficiency as opposed to penalizing students on their path to mastering a subject or skill.

Specifically, black male student achievement in reading and math at the middle school level, and disproportionate rates of discipline and absenteeism continue to be an area where our district strives to improve. We are already taking the steps necessary as a board to help our administrators in securing programmatic resources, additional teaching assistance, and appropriate levels of support staff to ensure all students receive the instruction and school environment they need to thrive. As a result of our efforts to maintain a critical eye on these specific achievement gaps, we have already seen drastic improvement in test scores and attendance rates among these student populations.

Our school district educates a population of students that is majority black, and our school community continues to not only ensure we provide culturally competent education, but also ensure the leadership of our district reflects the student body we serve.

8. How do you see FPS working toward climate sustainability?

We are fortunate to live in a community that is committed to tackling climate change and supports the implementation of building and district level initiatives to move toward a sustainable future. Chief among these is our investment in a fleet of electrified buses, and I will continue to

actively partner with community organizations to help maximize the environmental efficiency this investment brings, while expanding the ways we as a district can continue to transition away from fossil fuel sources. With our continued work under the 2019 and 2025 facilities bonds our community passed, which are critical investments in our district's future, I look forward to continuing to find ways to improve our sustainability and commitment to a just and green future.

9. Are there any additional thoughts you would like to share?

Public schools are the cornerstone of our democracy, and under authoritarian and fascist governments, they are among the first institutions targeted. Whether it's through book bans, attacks on educators, defunding, and privatization schemes, these efforts are designed to hollow out public education from within and weaken our community. As a proud product of our public schools here in Michigan, I know how critical a strong public education is to the strength of our whole community. I do not take for granted that a single school board seat has real, material power. It sets budget priorities, shapes the district's posture in labor negotiations, and determines whether the district resists or accommodates privatization. My campaign is about defending Ferndale's public schools as a public good and ensuring every decision the board makes puts students, staff, and working families first, not private interests.