



**Local Candidate Questionnaire District 205**



**Background**

Candidate Name: **Nicole Bennett**

Party: **Non-partisan**

Office and Sub District You Are Seeking: **Rockford Public School Board #205 - Subdistrict D**

Name of Campaign Committee: **Committee to Elect Nicole Bennett**

Education Background: **Master of Social Work from Loyola University Chicago - Specialization in Children and Families Bachelor of Science - Sociology Major - Illinois State University**

Occupation, Place of Employment: **Community Impact Planner - Region 1 Planning Council**

Name(s) of Opponents: **Jude Makulec**

## Questions

1. Do you have an understanding of the District 205's current strategic objectives? Which objectives would you like to see emphasized or changed and why?

**Current strategic objectives include improving third grade literacy and math, improving middle school on-track, and increasing the graduate rate and freshman on-track rate. As the previous developer and implementer of a United Way middle school success initiative, Move the Middle, currently located in two Rockford Public Middle schools, I'm so thrilled middle school on-track is being prioritized. Johns Hopkins University research regarding Early Warning Response Systems tells us that if a 6th grader is off track in their attendance, behavior, or course performance, their probability of graduating on-time or within 1 year of their peers, is 10-20%. Getting students on-track and keeping students on-track will increase their overall educational success. The only objective I believe should be included is in regards to training and support for teachers. Teachers are faced with very challenging students as well as circumstances from outside of the classroom that contribute to many struggles throughout the day. A specific goal to provide support could have immediate as well as long lasting positive effects on classrooms and buildings.**

**Current universal goals include interrupting the predictability of student outcomes based on zip code and defining clear expectations for staff. Children have no control over zip code or circumstances they are born into. It is our responsibility as their community to support them as early as possible for the greatest potential for success. Students are also held to a high level of accountability with clear expectations as I believe to be beneficial for this clarity to apply to all within the District.**

2. Attracting and retaining sufficient excellent teachers is a priority for the district. What do you think of the district's five initiatives to accomplish this (Rockford University Pathway, HBCU partnership with Central State, NIU LEAP, Aspiring Teachers, and housing incentives)? Which would you revise or emphasize?

**I personally know several individuals who have taken advantage of these various initiatives and I believe they are very impactful and successful. For example, the Rockford University Urban Education Master's Program is one that has provided so many unique ideas within schools to address many common barriers. I also believe the teacher profession is one that is sometimes thankless and the additional support to encourage individuals to enter the field is essential. I believe one of the initiatives to emphasize is the New Teacher Induction and Mentoring Program. My little sister is currently attending Illinois State University for Elementary Education and she stated she would benefit greatly from a program that has a senior teacher as support. I feel senior staff can create a sense of belonging for new teachers and this can assist with teacher retention.**

3. What do you think of the district's system of evaluating the performance of schools? How should under-performing schools be addressed?

**Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to identify schools in need of comprehensive or targeted support and improvement and to develop processes by which to support these schools. I believe the current process of identifying schools of need and providing additional resources, supports, staff, and programming should continue as well as improve. Dr. Jarrett recently presented a "color system" to identify schools which were excelling in addition to schools which were currently struggling. He discussed a plan to provide mentoring and support to principals as well as more targeted resources specific to the needs of those buildings. I think these methods are a great way to utilize data, to inform decisions, on how to best support underperforming schools.**

4. What do you think of the district's strategy of driving funding for strategic personnel investments at schools with greatest need? How do you plan to evaluate the success of this effort?

**I believe schools with the greatest need should have additional investments including funding, support staff, and additional programming. Every school should have what they need to be successful in an equitable way that leads to positive student outcomes. Evidence based funding is a best practice and the District's current plan to merge practices with site based reporting will allow for this effort to be evaluated. Data evaluation regarding schools performance will allow for this effort to be evaluated. From my experience working inside Lincoln Middle School and RESA Middle School, compared to my experience attending a listening session with parents and caregivers at Eisenhower Middle School, the needs of the students, staff, building, and community are vastly different. I believe students, parents and caregivers, and staff should be allowed time and space to provide their feedback regarding the needs of their schools.**

5. What will be your approach to holding yourself, the board and administration accountable? How do you define success for your potential term?

**Success for my potential term would include plans and action steps toward increasing middle-school on-track rates, creating trauma sensitive environments, incorporating student voice in decision making, and increasing equity and inclusive efforts in schools. The goals of the board are student achievement and protecting student interest. In order to do so, strategic goals, based on data, should be collected and measured over time. Students and families should be provided the opportunity to complete surveys regarding their specific representation based in their subdistrict. Each area of our community has different needs and it's the responsibility of each board member to represent, advocate for, and ensure those needs are heard.**

6. What will be your approach to making the board a cohesive and effective unit?

**The ultimate goals of the school board are student achievement and protecting the interests of students. One of the greatest strengths of a social worker is the ability to listen and support differing opinions. It is essential for the Board to remember they are a collective with a vision on what the District needs to be and the steps on how to get there.**

7. What community engagement and support do you want to see for the board and the district?

**I want to create and maintain relationships within schools with staff, students, and in the community. I want to present at events that matter to students and ensure families have access to me should they have issues to be addressed. I plan to be a voice on the Board that represents the community voice. I also would love to see more community resources and support inside the schools.**

8. What strategic partnerships do you want to see created by the District?

**To effectively determine what partnerships are the most needed, I think the District should allow for parent/caregivers, student and staff input on partnerships to create or maintain, specific to their schools. Based on high rates of trauma, violence, and mental health concerns, I believe students throughout the District need services from The Family Peace Center, additional Social Workers and Mental Health Professionals, as well as starting community violence intervention programs. I also believe more connections to and partnerships with our business community, specific to subdistricts. For example, businesses and business professionals, located near schools, with proper background check clearance, could volunteer, provide internships, or students could be provided vocational training.**

9. What do you think are the challenges and solutions to school safety? Do you support or oppose the Rockford Police in the schools as resource officers?

**From personally working in a school for three years, I know firsthand many challenges and solutions regarding school safety. With increases in trauma experiences, mental health diagnoses, community violence, and experiences of bullying, school safety brings many challenges for staff and faculty. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, programs to support learning about social and emotional skills have shown effectiveness in increasing the frequency of positive social behavior and decreases in the frequency of conduct issues and emotional problems. Other solutions include providing training to teachers and staff regarding classroom management, school wide discipline, use of community referrals, and trauma responses and supports.**

**In regards to Rockford Police in schools as resource officers, I do not support this current practice. Very little research supports the effectiveness of school resource officers in schools and there is no formal training typically provided in regards to identifying the root of a problem as well as de-escalation for children. Law enforcement are not and should not be responsible for enforcing minor school discipline offenses. Funds for resource officers should be provided to trained mental and behavioral specialists, counselors, social workers, and community partners. Law enforcement can always be contacted when necessary to assist and enforce criminal laws.**

10. What responsibility does the school district and the school board have to the business community of Rockford?  
Do you feel the District is meeting that responsibility?

**Rockford Public School, District #205, school philosophy is to “serve the community by equipping all of its diverse students with the necessary tools to compete in a global marketplace, succeed in future educational pursuits, and contribute to society.” Roughly 7,000 students dropout of high school every day in the United States. In our community, 34.4% of our high schoolers are not graduating high school. Research tells us that high school dropouts are 3 times as likely to be unemployed than college graduates, more likely to be inmates in state and federal prisons, and women aged 16-24 are more likely to be single mothers. High rates of high school dropouts make it difficult for our businesses to attract talent, retain talent, and have reliable employees. Currently, I believe our business community could increase their levels of partnerships with the District including more volunteers in the school, more internships, as well as vocational training. If students are not attending school, not behaving as they should, not performing as they could, or getting the necessary social emotional support they need to be successful, we have failed to prepare them to be successful and productive members of our community, specifically related to our business community.**

11. What is the status of student academic achievement in your District? And how can it be improved?

**Currently, there are high needs in several areas in relation to District performance in comparison to the State level data. Chronic absenteeism, or students who miss 10% or more of school, is currently at 60% compared to the state average of 29.8%. Our District currently has 45.2% of students who are low-income and receive free or reduced lunch. For graduation rates, District 205 is at 65.6% of students, while the state is at 87.3%. For our black students, only 53.2% currently graduate high-school in comparison to 70% of our white students. Regarding students experiencing homelessness, 4% of our District students in comparison to only 2% of the state. All of these factors impact our students and their overall achievement and outcomes.**

**For sub-district D specifically, school improvement funds are being provided to the elementary, middle, or high schools, to support their targeted or commendable classifications. These specific funds are seeking to support the achievement of English Language Learners, students with Individual Education Plans, Black students, as well as multiracial students. Ways to improve student achievement include feelings of belonging, mental health resources and support, quality instruction provided by quality teachers, funding and support to maintain facilities, at least one Social Worker inside every school building, and identifying the early warning signs of a student struggling. Upon identification of a struggle or concern, students can be immediately provided school wide or individual resources to support their needs.**

12. What in your background leads you to believe that you would be an effective school board member?

**I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with over 15 years of extensive experience working with trauma surrounding youth and their families. My background includes work in child welfare, domestic violence, outpatient mental health facilities, a child advocacy center, Rockford Public Schools, and United Way. I have a Master of Social Work degree from Loyola University Chicago where I specialized in Children and Families. One of the greatest needs our District has is for trauma and mental health support for our students and I have the qualifications to make this come to fruition. I was born and raised in Rockford and I am choosing to raise my daughter here. I want her to have the best education possible and have a vested interest in ensuring this same level of education for the over 27,000 other students in our community.**

**Do you Support or Oppose the Following**

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|---|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Support | <input type="checkbox"/> Oppose            | <b>Year-Round Schools</b>                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Oppose | <b>Charter Schools</b>                                  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Support | <input type="checkbox"/> Oppose            | <b>Magnet Schools</b>                                   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Support | <input type="checkbox"/> Oppose            | <b>School Uniforms</b>                                  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Support | <input type="checkbox"/> Oppose            | <b>Comprehensive Truancy/dropout prevention program</b> |