



CANDIDATE SPOTLIGHT

MICHAEL RIVERA

SCHOOL BOARD - AT LARGE

CANDIDATE: **MICHAEL RIVERA**

OFFICE: **SCHOOL BOARD – AT LARGE**

WEBSITE: RIVERAFORSCHOOLS.com

What would you like voters to know about you?

I want voters to know that I'm just a regular person. I am not aspiring to be a politician and would like to be able to serve on the school board for four years and then find someone who will carry on my legacy and keep focusing on education and the kids. But first and foremost, I am a husband and parent. My family and faith are very important to me. When I was thinking about running, we prayed on it, and we decided to do it as a family. I have a 14-year-old who will be going to Heritage High School this fall. My daughter is 10 and has special needs. She will be going to Frederick Douglass Elementary School. We have been very fortunate that she has had very good and caring teachers who have been with her for several years.

How long have you lived in Loudoun County?

Since 2017. We moved back to Virginia from Houston, but we moved to Annandale first and then moved to Leesburg when I got the job with the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office. Like many Loudoun residents, we moved to Loudoun County because we found it was a great place to raise a family. It was picturesque and the schools were great.

Why are you running for the at-large seat?

Last year I ran for the Leesburg seat, but I was unsuccessful because it was a three-way race. I did come in second and my conservative opponent, Lauren Shernoff, and I were both dedicated to staying in the race. Lauren and I have spoken since then and because we both decided to run again, it made sense for her to run for the Leesburg District and for me to run for At-Large. We want to work together, and I want to represent all the residents of Loudoun County. She will be a great school board member, and we have a great group of candidates.

You've had some interesting careers can you tell us a little about that?

I went to college for engineering. In 1984 when I was graduating high school, I was ambitious and wanted to make a lot of money, so I was advised to get into computer science. I first applied to Rochester Institute of Technology but ended up attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) where I got my bachelor's and master's degrees.

I worked in IT for 15 years as software development project manager and as an IT consultant. I was making a lot of money, but I wasn't very happy. I decided to go into construction because I wanted to build things which took my entire family to Houston. I enjoyed working in the field on several major commercial construction projects in the Houston and San Antonio areas.

However, I always wanted to be in law enforcement. I applied to multiple agencies and was hired by the Harris County Sheriff's office and worked there for about one and a half years. I became a sworn deputy with the Texas Department of Public Safety, and I knew I wanted to move back to Virginia so I applied to the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office and was hired six months later. It is a career that I've always wanted. I enjoy working as a law enforcement officer, helping people, and talking to members of my community. Despite the current climate in the country, most people are very appreciative of what we do, especially in Loudoun County.

What are the first things you would like to change once you are on the school board?

That's a great question. There are tons of issues that need to be looked at, but it will take time, so my top three issues to address first are:

First, I'd like to address student safety. We need to look at student discipline policies, the dress code, and the school's relationship with law enforcement and SROs and how we deal with illegal activity. Illegal activity by students should be handled by law enforcement and not the school administration. Juveniles who go into criminal activity can escalate over time. It might start as something small and then the crime escalates. I want to make sure they get the right attention they need at the time before the criminal activity goes any further.

Another issue is teachers' quality of life. A lot of people talk about salary, but if teachers aren't getting the support they need, they will still be unhappy because the issues haven't been addressed. Teachers need to be respected and have the tools, materials, and supplies they need to teach and focus on the curriculum. They should not be bogged down with administrative paperwork. Diversity training also takes up a lot of time. We need to look at how to make the lives of teachers better. Diversity training is distracting from the core mission of education. LCPS has a lot of good, committed teachers and we need to support them.

Third is fiscal accountability. The school board has not been accountable when it comes to the budget. When the previous superintendent announced that they had a \$40 million surplus, the school board spent it all without talking to the teachers and asking them what they needed. Now we have a \$1.6 billion budget. We should buy classroom supplies so that teachers don't have to go out and spend their own money to have the supplies they need. Also, the school board budget keeps going up while enrollment is going down. We need better transparency. The budget is available online, but you have to dig so deep to find anything, and a lot of details are buried. The budget needs to be more easily accessible with charts, graphs and comparisons so that a lay person can find out how the money is being spent and where. You should not have to be a forensic accountant to find the information.

I would also like to get politics and ideology out of school. Kids are suffering because education has gone off the rails. We need to focus on the basics.

What do you hope to accomplish if you are elected?

I am looking forward to working with a school board that is similar in thought. The current slate of conservative candidates is all in line with academic excellence and getting politics out of the classroom, but a lot of the controversy has to do with adults. Children are innocent. The focus of my opponent and the liberal agenda is focusing on a child's sexuality and the color of their skin. If we stop teaching kids about adult sexual concepts and how to be racist, we can focus on education. We need to stop focusing on what WE want to do as adults and take politics out of schools. We also need more respect for our country such as honoring the flag and teaching patriotic American history.

What are your thoughts on the controversial books in schools?

Controversial books are an issue in LCPS. The false flag of book banning and getting rid of books can't be further from the truth. I want age-appropriate materials and parents don't want sexually explicit and graphic books for kids. We need parents to be involved in reviewing the books and not allowing any one person to spend money on buying books to promote a political agenda. In 2019, over \$1 million was spent on a diverse books collection which focused on LGBTQ+ books and books on racism.

We also need to see more data on transgender students, instances of bullying, and alleged high suicide rates to make better decisions for all students.

This fall the school board will be working with a new superintendent. What are your thoughts on that?

I believe that we should listen, work together, and make decisions from facts and evidence and move forward as a team. We must give the new superintendent a chance to prove he is different from the previous ones.

You mentioned teacher salaries. What do you think about collective bargaining for teachers?

Teachers as a group deserve to be represented. As a group of professionals, you deserve to get paid appropriately. I don't think, however, the union should be the group to represent teachers. It is not in the best interest of kids. For example, Randi Weingarten who is head of the American Federation of Teachers, uses the union for a political agenda. That would be bad for Loudoun County because it would take authority away from the school board and their ability to work directly with teachers to resolve issues.

What has been your most memorable experience?

Considering how hard I worked for it and my desire to go into law enforcement, graduating from the police academy in Houston was an important moment because I achieved my goal. I never gave up; even though I had obstacles. I kept my faith that the right organization was going to come along and I'm very happy to be where I am today.