

Application for Appointment

Pell City Board of Education

James Epperson



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION The Pell City Board of Education Steering Committee and The City Council for the City of Pell City request applicants provide additional information on their candidacy for appointment. Please respond to the following questions in a separate document and include the responses with your application submission. Responses per question should be limited to 500 words or fewer.

1. Why are you interested in serving on the Pell City Board of Education?

As a member of the Pell City Community and having children either graduating from or attending Pell City School System, I believe that the betterment of our community and securing our future is highly dependent on the education of our children. Additionally, an effective school system attracts citizens and businesses to the Pell City area.

As a participant in social media, I have seen many negative comments about our school system. Instead of participating in those conversations or taking comments at face value, my family and I sought to educate ourselves on the issues at hand. Through involvement and education, I have seen what our school system does well and areas of opportunity. With the transition to an appointed school board, I believe this is an opportunity to help our system transition while, hopefully, providing a mixture of members from different educational and career backgrounds who are determined to see advancement in education, extracurricular programs, well-being, and student safety.

As a nurse for twenty-five years, I have dedicated my life to the service of others. As I've grown as a nurse, a leader, and a parent, I would like to expand my service to include the children, teachers, coaches, and administrators of my local community. While I have not served in a school system, education is an integral part of my role in nursing leadership as well as financial knowledge, stewardship, and outcome driven management.

Lastly, I would like to play a part in advancing excellence in our system, improving communication about our school system, improving parental involvement, and promoting the positive aspects of our system to the broader community. While the school system may meet certain milestones in grades, budgeting, and class offerings, the success of a system is also driven by the perception of the community at large.

2. List your prior involvement in the Pell City School System or other public or private school systems.

My involvement in the Pell City School System has been diverse.

As a parent, I have supported and attended many functions including band, soccer, theater, JROTC, and show choir. I have been a member of the soccer and band boosters and have volunteered time to these programs.

My family and I attended the opening of the high school cafeteria as well as the new band hall. We have also attended athletic meetings to understand the viewpoints of the athletes, parents, and coaches on topics such as nutrition.

My family supported the tax referendum and attended local meetings regarding the tax increase and the school's vision of the future. In the town halls discussing an appointed versus elected board, my family was also in attendance. Our attendance is not about visibility, but rather about making ourselves knowledgeable on topics we are asked to make decisions on.

My wife and I have attended many school board meetings over the past two years. There have been several occasions on which we were the only parents in attendance. Through the board meetings, I have spoken to the members about the high rates of expulsion, the mental well-being of our students, state programs for well-being, and advocated for additional resources to support our children in the post covid environment.

In subsequent board meetings, attendees were informed by Dr. Stover of the programs available to our students, new positions associated with student support, and a new program led primarily by students at Williams Intermediate. Anecdotally, I have seen what appears to be a reduction in the number of expulsions voted on at each meeting.

Also, my wife and I have met with the superintendent and nutrition director on student nutrition. The director educated us on the meal programs, variety offered, item selection under the nutrition program, and comparisons between our nutrition options versus other nutrition programs in surrounding counties and school systems. We learned of the direction of the nutrition program and have seen an improvement in quality of offerings at our schools as well as better promotion of our nutrition program on social media.

3. Disclose any potential conflicts that may arise during your service, including, but not limited to (Does not disqualify from service):

a. Do you have any children or relatives enrolled in the system?

My son is currently a sophomore at Pell City High School

b. Do you have any relatives employed by the system?

My wife has served as a substitute teacher for Pell City School System

c. Do you provide any services or conduct any business with the system?

No services or business relations with the system

4. What strengths, abilities, education, or experiences uniquely qualify you to serve? Include any significant contributions to Pell City and/or the community at large.

As a nurse, I have worked with many groups of individuals and cared for patients of all backgrounds. As a nursing leader, I have implemented programs to reduce harm and promote quality care as evidenced by qualitative measurements. Although these are specific to healthcare, research and evidenced based practice are applicable across a variety of industries.

Also, as a leader, I have knowledge of policy and procedure formation, budgeting, financial analysis, data aggregation, regulatory compliance, legal implications, and navigating ethical dilemmas. My role requires me to successfully interact with many different disciplines and reach consensus of a shared vision. I must have a knowledge of human resources, associate rights, accountability and disciplinary strategies, and the surrounding market. My role has also required me to present data to our governing boards.

While I cannot think of any significant contributions to Pell City at large, I believe my engagement with the school system and city council has provided me the knowledge to advocate for changes on a larger scale and has helped me communicate more openly with the community.

5. What goals should the Pell City Board of Education prioritize over the next 3-5 years? Include things you think Pell City Schools are doing well and should be supported, and things you would seek to improve.

Pell City offers a wide range of opportunities for our students and multiple diploma paths. Our graduating classes have received large amounts of scholarships, and many are well equipped to enter the workforce or go on to secondary education. The system has also partnered well with Jefferson State on technical programs, AP classes, and college prep.

The system has engaged teachers and principals who are dedicated to our students and community. These individuals are key to the success of our school and are highly influential to students and to successful changes. Unfortunately, we also have teachers who value a hands-off approach to education, utilizing worksheets and Schoology to manage classes. While technology has a place in education, it cannot be the sole methodology as teachers are meant to both educate and inspire students.

Student recognition could be better balanced, with the system highlighting competitive accomplishments as well as outstanding performance in academics. The system has focused on attendance rather than engagement to improve its rating. While attendance is essential, the presence of students is vastly different from the engagement of students. And finally, the system has created school calendars and workdays that ensure teachers are unable to complete daily tasks, disrupting work-life balance and further reducing the relative wages of our teaching staff.

There are concerns about a growing community with schools already nearing capacity or exceeding student to teacher ratios. We have several schools that are dated and are located very close geographically. A long-term plan for growth should be formed with a concurrent plan to consolidate services, reduce spending, and provide a smooth transition as students progress. Perhaps having several elementary schools collate to one intermediate school provides educational challenges as well as disciplinary and developmental challenges to our students.

Regarding extracurricular activities, we have a high number of students enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs, which translates to reduced opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. It could be transformative if aid and opportunity were available to students, or if booster clubs could participate collaboratively to ensure all programs have a focus on excellence and can recruit more students. I understand the desire to improve activities our own children are engaged with, but it is time for these activities to be viewed and supported collectively rather than through individual silos.

Parental participation and system communication are performed well in some schools, but this could be improved upon. Notification of board meetings, agenda items, and a process to better engage parents is needed and could help the system respond to the voices of our community.

Overall, I believe our school system has a lot of positive attributes, but excellence is a journey, not a destination. I hope that this committee selects board members who have varied opinions and backgrounds in order to collaborate effectively across many topics. Whether selected or not, I will continue to support our schools and do what I can as a parent to improve the standings of Pell City School Systems.