

Name: Verland Coker

District: Albuquerque

Position: 4

Please answer the following to the best of your ability within 150 words or less.

1. What is motivating you to run for the school board?

I've always had a passion of learning and as a result I've never been able to really succeed in school. My motivation is to push education forward. Education has stagnated for 30 years and APS has the capacity to not only lead the state, but to lead the nation in education. I'm tired of nothing changing and seeing all of the wasted potential at APS.

2. What will your priorities be as a school board member?

My priorities are tiered in a way that provides guiding principles to vote on policy with. The three starting priorities are teacher salary, student engagement, and facility management. Above that is long term goals such as assessment reform, institutional divestment from oil/fracking, and restorative justice implementation. All of these are under singular umbrella of 21st century education and bringing APS forward is the overall goal.

3. What have you done in the past to help your community thrive?

I have been doing some community organization but not much. Much my post high school life has been in research and independent study. Most of my community work has been in regards to education.

4. How have you previously advocated for students and educators in your community?

I've been an advocate in parent-teacher meetings, IEP meetings, and disciplinary hearings for students in various parts of APS. I also offer tutoring services for free and help with GED prep. For educators, I am able to provide professional development on a variety of topics and have continued to advocate for better pay and a reinvestment in our educators.

5. How did your educational experiences shape you, and what lessons will you take with you from those experiences?

Being both a high school dropout and a college dropout I've learned that education as it exists today isn't right for everyone. Arguably, the system isn't really suited for anyone at all. I've seen what our institutions do to creativity and I've seen how it harms even those who succeed within them. Most importantly, however, I've learned that we can do better if we actively heal and work together to improve.

6. Have you ever worked as an employee in public education? If so, how did your school board affect you? What lessons will you take from your experience into this position?

Not in any official capacity. But quite frankly, I don't think anyone can really say how the school board affects them individually. It's hard to see the ramifications of policy and more importantly it's hard to see what an individual board member brings to the district as a whole. As far as I can tell, there is no tangible involvement from the school board with the schools themselves. But this too is a lesson. It teaches me that part of the reasons for the animosity towards APS and the constant statistical failures stem from the school board being out of touch, not only with the schools and parents, but with education as an institution.

7. New Mexico has the lowest high school graduation rate in the nation. What specific steps will you take to address this problem?

Step one is getting an honest assessment. Right now, I don't count as a drop out under the current graduation rate metrics. I don't count for or against my cohorts rate and I am effectively erased. This means that the rate we have is inflated. As well, each school is inflated due to the distribution of graduate impact. This is just a baseline systemic failure designed to incentivize inaction and it doesn't even approach praxis or policy. Step two is restructuring the environment of our schools to be more welcoming and engaging. This includes later start times, more extracurricular support, a block schedule switch, higher teacher salaries, and more emphasis on community schools. Step three is changing our standards and curriculum to better serve the intended creativity and agency with the student and reassert teachers as a facilitators of learning and not test administrators.

8. New Mexico ranks 49th in 4th-grade reading and math scores. What specific steps will you take to address this problem?

This problem would a more hands on approach in fixing it. I would have to physically see the tests and figure out the dissonance between the test and what these students are learning. Often times the tests we give out aren't accurate to what should be taught or what students should be learning. After that I would have to examine a 4th graders finished test to see what they put. Assessment as it is now is always an incomplete picture. Without a perspective that really tries to understand how to improve these scores or even if these scores are even worth anything, we end up improving nothing.

9. How will you advocate for both the students and the employees of the public education system in your role?

By acting on feedback. If there's one thing I've noticed in my year at the board meetings is that much if the board listens but does not act based on feedback. There is so much that needs to be done for education as a system and all of the reform I'm looking for requires support from faculty and students. It requires an iterative approach and a cooperative mindset which requires advocacy.

10. Think New Mexico, a non-partisan think tank, released a study in 2017 which suggests that the percentage of a state's education budget that makes it to the classroom, as

opposed to administrative costs, is related to student performance. Do you agree? Will you advocate for an increased percentage of the budget going to the classroom? Why or why not? If so, how will you address the issue?

I absolutely agree. I really don't understand how this could be contested. If we aren't paying for students and classrooms then what are we paying for? I really need to sit down for a few days and just go over the entirety of the budget personally. There has to be something wrong with our pipelines. A billion dollar budget shouldn't produce one of the worst school systems in the nation.

11. New Mexico is combatting a "teacher shortage." A recent study by NMSU said New Mexico's "teacher attractiveness score"* is 2.18 on a scale of one to five. What will you do to increase this score and make sure these vacancies are filled by qualified individuals as quickly as possible?

Salary, training, support, and investment. Pushing education forward isn't going to happen when we can keep and attract teachers. I find it absurd that no one respects educators either through excessive blame or through inequitable pay. We don't have the luxury of firing every teacher that falls out of line or who makes a mistake. We need to build on what we have and we need to create a culture that can take us to where we need to go. If we actually want to improve education, then we have to actually invest in our teachers.

12. How can you make your school board an example of excellence for the other boards in the state?

I don't think I personally can. If I get elected then it will be discordant and the board won't look like a symbol of progress just because I'm there.. I believe we need to take several "rebuilding years." We need to assess, iterate and grow without the fear of failing at a goal that we have no chance to get to anyway. Things are bad, I can't fix that without everyone on the same page. I can't do it without everyone in the system. I can't do this alone. So we do this together, or we don't do it at all.

**According to [NMSU](#) "Teacher Attractiveness Score" takes into consideration compensation, working conditions, teacher qualifications, and teacher turnover.*