



Atlanta Public Schools School Board District 4 Candidates Questions and Responses

NBCA is grateful to Jennifer McDonald and Sanjay Mendonca for putting themselves forward for the Atlanta Public Schools School Board District 4 post. NBCA posed questions to both candidates. Their answers are below in full and unedited.

Please note that per its Bylaws NBCA does not endorse any candidates for any elected position.

1. Why are you running for a position on the Board of the Atlanta Public Schools and why do you feel you are qualified for this position?	
Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
I am running for reelection for APS BOE District 4 and have been serving in this role for the past four years. I came onto the board at a critical time when leadership of the district was a major concern to me as a parent and taxpayer. My friends and neighbors and fellow parents and taxpayers shared many of these same concerns. A change in who was leading the district as Superintendent was necessary. That change was a significant challenge as the Board was split but we needed to see drastic improvement across our schools and programs. I advocated to remove that Superintendent. It was critical that I listened to my constituents and worked closely with my fellow Board members to implement change. We were successful. After that change was confirmed, and we knew the Superintendent would change, the critical work was to focus on finding the right leader for APS. We were incredibly fortunate to bring Dr. Battle in as interim Superintendent while we planned our search. As Vice Chair, I played a critical role in that process. Through incredible diligence, we identified and hired the right leader and the district has seen incredible improvement in the last 12 months under the leadership of Dr. Bryan Johnson. This role is about leadership, work ethic, presence and community. I have demonstrated that in not only the	I have over 13 years of experience within our Atlanta Public School system as a parent and an active PTA dad. I am the only candidate in District 4 with a child still in APS. My son is currently a freshman at North Atlanta High School and my daughter just graduated from it. Our schools are facing a crisis, both financially and with our low performance rates. There is a lack of transparency, accountability and representation. Our budget, and as a result the portion we contribute to APS through property taxes, has ballooned out of control. And despite this, we are looking at a budget shortfall in the years to come! We are therefore at a critical juncture - one that defines the future of our schools and our communities - and we need leadership that can help APS navigate through this treacherous time and survive, to come out stronger. As a PTA dad who has been heavily involved with our schools, I know firsthand the things that are working in our schools and the things that are need improvement. Professionally, having been an executive and a business owner for many years, I have a strong background in financial and organizational management and strategic planning.

two scenarios above but in a long list of other actions and behaviors including driving more funding into our classrooms and giving the largest teacher pay raise in the history of the district. It is about listening, learning and leading. I am honored that my community has been asking me for over a year to commit to running again so we can continue to do this important work with consistency and continuity. True advocacy is not about being on a stage on a microphone and making promises to win an election, it is about having the relationships and the infrastructure to actually move the needle and get the work done. I am the only candidate who can do that day one of this next term.

This role is also about managing the budget and we have taken drastic measures to improve the negative impact of prior administration including reducing spend at the central office by 70 million dollars as a first step but more diligence is needed. This is a critical imperative for the Board and for Dr. Johnson. This is also ongoing work and we have the team in place to continue to drive improvement.

I have also taken opportunities to be a leader in the community very seriously for over a decade. I was an active multi-role leader every single year at every school our son attended. Taking leadership roles is an important experience and one single role for one year at one school would never have prepared me for this work.

I also think it is incredibly important to understand the work the Foundations at each school are doing, how they do and then support that work. The Foundations are a critical support mechanism for our schools. I supported the Foundation at E Rivers every single year, (Sutton does not maintain a foundation) and I supported the Foundation at NAHS every year including before our son attended. The Foundations are an incredible force for good regarding the programs and services they provide students and staff and I am proud to say that I have donated to our school foundations every year we were at E Rivers and every year we were at North Atlanta High School. The district provides so much support to our schools but the Foundations provide a long list of extras that make our school experiences even more exceptional. I think it is important that any candidate for a leadership role demonstrates that commitment to support this incredible work and understands and values how important these investments are in our schools.

This is what APS needs right now - someone with a strong financial and management background, and someone who understands our challenges as a parent. I have the time, the energy, the skills, the experience and the personal motivation to represent our district and our families to make APS better for our children and our community.

2. What are the most important issues facing the Atlanta Public Schools and what actions should APS take to address these issues?

Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
Literacy and numeracy proficiency are the critical goals for our students. We need the financial support to increase the programs and the resources to do this. We have already reduced the budget at the central office by 70 million dollars in the past year but we have significant additional work to do around the budget. Our Budget Chair, appointed by myself and the Board Chair, has done an incredible job and we will all continue to ask the hard questions around budget, allocation and spending. A Board member's role is not to attack the district or our schools and their test scores, it is about identifying needs, being leaders and understanding what we need to do to address those needs. The Board is working very closely with Dr. Johnson to continue to address the immediate needs of our students. As a Board member, we also increased funding for IB and for DLI which is something we need to continue because of the incredible impact of those programs. DLI as Sarah Smith has had a profound impact on that community and will continue to support these high performing programs. We need to continue to support this important work. We also know how imperative it is to hire and maintain the best teachers. As referenced, the Board approved the largest pay raise in district history and we have a goal of paying our teachers even more. All of this work is important. We also know that the needs at each school differ so it is about having institutional knowledge and creating supportive policy that helps each of our schools across the district.	There are 3 issues that I would like to address with urgency: • The budget: Currently APS has a \$1.85 Billion budget and has run a deficit of \$100 million dollars. We can't keep throwing more money into a system that is not being run efficiently. We really need to bring this under control in order to better utilize our money and resources towards educating our children. APS needs to be better at managing its budget and its expenses and with full transparency. The Board needs to be better at holding APS accountable for our tax dollars. • Proficiency rates: 7 out of 10 kids in our schools are <u>NOT</u> proficient at their grade levels. This is unacceptable. We cannot continue to fail our children. APS needs to re-evaluate its teaching programs and work to cater them more towards the needs of our children. They also need to provide more resources and support to our teachers to be better equipped to do their jobs well. There is much that can be done to help our kids be better educated. • Community Engagement: Currently our district lacks representation. We have not had a townhall in 4 years or any real opportunity for the community to be engaged in the process and the system. I will work hard to bridge this gap and fill this void. As your board member, I will be your liaison between APS and our community to make sure we are represented, and we build back trust and engagement with APS. Please see my response to question 4 below for more details on my community engagement plan.

3. What is your position regarding APS potentially closing one of the two Sarah Smith campuses?

Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
I have known the SSES community very well for years. I live in the SSES boundary. I have worked very closely with a group of their key parent leaders to understand their point of view. They are a very informed and invested group of people. I also know the community that surrounds these schools have a very invested point of view even if their kids don't attend SSES. I have met with Councilman Shook many times to understand what the community's concerns are as well as meeting with you as recently as the end of last week, Robert. It is very important to receive the feedback from your neighbors and that we have a direct line of communication. For Sarah Smith, we know one of those campuses is in a serious state of need and it's important that we also understand the school administration's point of view of which I am in a unique position to do so. We know that the school community wants one campus and that input combined with the FCA scores speak volumes. As a result, the 'do nothing' approach is not only irresponsible, it does not reflect what the school community actually wants or needs. I advocated on behalf of these voices from the day the initial scenarios were released on August 22 and that advocacy was reflected in the refreshed scenarios delivered September 22 and October 9. We also know that one campus means increased traffic for the neighborhood and increased traffic causes issues for parking as well. In my conversations with Councilman Shook we have discussed the importance of addressing car pool, bus lane and parking to have the least negative impact on the neighborhood. The district has had a survey open for months and pushed that survey link out in numerous different channels so that the community, whether parents, neighbors or taxpayers could share their input. APS also has a wide open feedback mechanism called Let's Talk and we have had tremendous feedback across every neighborhood through that platform. All of that information is aggregated so that all voices are represented. I have also had hundreds of conversations over the past eight weeks including my call with you last week Robert so we ensure that input is collected from all corners of the district and the cluster.	Ever since APS released its first round of the Facilities proposal on August 22, I have been standing up strongly in the community to voice my objections and my concerns about it. The plan was rushed and the feedback of our communities was not objectively sought till very late in the process. There has been a lack of trust and transparency, and real partnership. As for Sarah Smith specifically, it has been my position that the closure is unnecessary and doesn't address the real reasons behind why APS is having to make this drastic decision! I have worked with several Sarah Smith parents and have expressed this consistently. The truth is that APS is not managing their \$1.85 Billion dollar budget well and now our families are having to pay the price with closures. The yearly operational savings of \$1.5 to \$2 million that they are looking to achieve doesn't justify the disruption to the community and our schools, given the amount of wastage we currently have. This is also not a well-thought out plan and has incorporated very little feedback from the community. The fact that APS suggested a rooftop playground on a parking deck, at the last in-person feedback session, goes to show how disconnected they are with the Sarah Smith community! I do recognize that the primary campus is in dire need of maintenance, or a full rebuild actually, but let's not forget that it was APS' responsibility to maintain it and it has been their lack of facilities maintenance that has led to the campus now being in a state of disrepair. Our School Board has not held them accountable for years for this and we need to change that! The facilities proposal that was released yesterday (Oct 28th) is an improvement but there is much work that needs to be done. It will require E-SPLIST money to be approved and assigned towards a full rebuild of the campus, and it will require a strong transition plan to avoid disruption. I plan to stay on top of this by helping APS with their financial planning for E-SPLIST next year and by making sure that the Sarah Smith community is not facing any disruptions or drop in proficiencies and student outcomes through the transition.

4. The operation of schools in a residential neighborhood inevitably results in the need for coordination among parents, residents, and APS. This need will be compounded if one of the Sarah Smith campuses is closed and additional students are added to the remaining campus. What is your attitude to parents and neighborhood residents having a voice in resolving issues that may arise?	
Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
Parent and community members and taxpayer voices are critical to the process. We know a consolidated campus will need additional parking and to address the bus lane/carpool drop off referenced above. Parent and community engagement will always matter. I have been an APS parent since 2012 and we are so fortunate to have the incredible commitment from our community members. These recent conversations regarding facilities are just one topic. Input matters across a multitude of topics from facilities to school calendar. The input from the community regarding the school calendar is one great example of my listening and advocacy. I was able to influence a change in the school calendar that had been a problem for years when Dr. Johnson came on board. That school calendar change was very well received by families across APS. Again, this is just one more example. All of our taxpayers have the right to ask if they are receiving a return on their investment in APS and community engagement is key to open lines of communication and making an impact. I am so grateful for the level of engagement that surrounds not only Sarah Smith but all of the schools in this cluster.	As mentioned earlier, community engagement is one of my top priorities when elected. Every parent and community member MUST have a voice and needs to be heard and represented. We currently have a huge void in this particular area and I will work hard to fill and close this. For that very reason, I have proactively released a comprehensive community engagement plan on my site that addresses this in detail. I plan to have: • Quarterly town halls • Weekly open office hours • Monthly newsletters and updates • Direct contact channels (email, website, social media, etc) • A parent liaison for every school • Frequent school visits (every school in our cluster every quarter) • Frequent attendance and representation at NPU meetings and at organizations such as the Buckhead Council of Neighborhoods • Meeting with Neighborhood Civic Association Boards such as the North Buckhead Civic Association, twice a year. In addition to this, I will work with our local and state level agencies to maximize resources and outcomes, and focus on school safety, after-school programming, mental health services, and transportation improvements. Please take a moment to review the full plan in detail: https://tinyurl.com/2hs5nrsv
5. Do you promise to actively solicit input from parents and residents on an ongoing basis?	
Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
Absolutely, as I have done for the past 14 years. As an active PTA leader who held numerous roles at E. Rivers, including PTA President, PTA roles every year at Sutton and PTA roles every year at NAHS, I was also on the Board of NAPPS (North	YES - this is a priority for me. I will be 100% available to our parents, our residents and our community as and when needed. This will be my full-time job and responsibility for the next 4 years in office and I will show up.

Atlanta Parents for Public Schools) for seven years and served as President for two. ALL of these roles including now as the Vice Chair of the Board requires listening, collaboration, advocacy and connection with our community members. I am incredibly present at our schools and in the community. I will continue to be not only front and center but accessible to this community.	
6. What specific actions do you plan to facilitate this ongoing input and coordination?	
Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
I will continue to support my community by being openly accessible and responsive as I have been for the past 14 years. I am engaged with the parent leaders already and will remain engaged with not only the neighborhoods but also the new City Council 7 representative. I will also continue to be responsive to emails and calls. For example, Robert, you phoned me last week and I called you back the same day. I have demonstrated this for years and will continue to do so. I am also invited to neighborhood organization meetings and will continue to support those meetings.	Please refer to Question 4 above for the specifics of my community engagement plan. The link to the entire document can be found: https://tinyurl.com/2hs5nrsv
7. Many North Buckhead residents are interested in seeing a pedestrian connection between Blue Heron Nature Preserve and Old Ivy Road. What is your opinion about this possibility and are you willing to facilitate parents, residents, and APS evaluate this possibility?	
Jennifer McDonald	Sanjay Mendonca
I have already met with the team at Blue Heron regarding this idea. I have kept that team updated on the facilities plans as well. I have also met with Howard Shook multiple times to talk about needs for the neighborhood. I spoke with him again yesterday. We will do what is best for the school community and the neighborhoods. I love to support positive impact in our cluster and this is one more great idea to further explore. Again, that advocacy is not promised on a stage during an election, it is having the relationships and the infrastructure to make impact with the district and I am uniquely positioned to do this. I also want to share two other great candidate resources. All candidates were invited to participate. Atlanta Election 2025: Q&As with Atlanta Board of Education candidates CINS ABOE Voter Guide 2025.pdf	I support this wholeheartedly. I'm already working with some civic leaders to evaluate the possibility of sidewalks within a certain radius of all our schools to make them walkable for our children and our families. If a pedestrian connection between Blue Heron Nature Preserve and Old Ivy Road is what the community wants, then I will work hard to make this happen. This will require collaboration between several different groups (residents, civic bodies and leaders, and city) and may not completely fall under my purview but I will work to bring in all the stakeholders and decision makers to the table to evaluate and make this a reality.