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Page 2: Contact Information

Q1

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Page 3: Question 1: Early Learning

Q2

Virginia is known to have a 'non-system' of early learning where programs operate under different departments and sets of rules. What would you do to better link programs and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Virginia's early learning programs?

Early learning is more important to a child's development and learning than elementary or secondary school. Every student in Virginia deserves a quality education, and the facts have shown that quality education starts in pre-K and then kindergarten.

In my district, Chesterfield has Mon-Thurs kindergarten and Henrico has all-day Mon-Fri kindergarten. The head-start program helps low-income families cover early learning costs, but middle-class people don't qualify and they also can't afford private daycares, pre-K or Montessori schools.

If I am elected, I would try to create standards of best-practices to bring all of Virginia's early learning programs up to the same standards and procedures. I believe we should focus on implementing best practices rather than trying to come up with new programs all the time.

Page 4: Question 2: Foster Care

Q3

Most children entering foster care are returned to their families. In most cases, these families do not receive additional support and services from the child welfare system, which can lead to poor health and education outcomes for children. How do you think the Commonwealth can better support children once they are returned to their families?

We are facing a crisis in the foster care system. We need to take a hard look at this system and identify places that need to be totally reworked or rethought. The instability of bouncing a child from home to home affects a child's learning and psychological development. There is also a problem of foster parents abusing the system and trying to just get the benefits of taking in the child without giving those benefits over to the child.

If children are returned to their families without additional support, we have done nothing to solve the original problem that made them leave the home in the first place. There is also the new problem of a child returning from unstable conditions back into another unstable condition.

I believe that where children are concerned, we need to have a different outlook. Adults make their own choices and deal with the consequences, but children cannot take care of themselves and if the parents cannot protect them, the state has to. Certainly, once a child has gotten to the point where they are in foster care and the state is aware of that child's situation, the state should have responsibility for making sure that they have a better outcome, whether they stay in the system or they are returned.

If I am elected I will try to get the state government to follow the child's progress more carefully. If the child is going to be returned to their parents, we should be monitoring the situation that caused them to be in foster care in the first place. If the parents can't be trusted to provide for the child or give the benefits to the child, maybe we can work through the schools or existing social programs to provide the "additional support" the child requires without giving it to the parent. That should make Republicans happy, too.

Page 5: Question 3: School to Prison Pipeline

Q4

The US Department of Education data analyzed by the Center for Public Integrity shows that Virginia schools, in a single year, referred students to law enforcement agencies at three times the national rate. Numerous studies show that these school discipline policies increase the chances of these students becoming involved with the adult criminal justice system. If elected, how would you address these issues?

The school to prison pipeline is a major issue for my district and one focus of my campaign. Chesterfield County refers more students to law enforcement than almost any locality in Virginia. I informed my congressman, Dave Brat, as well as Congressman McEachin, that police officers can talk to our children without a representative present and they were both shocked. Not enough people think about the consequences of having our children in a situation where they have no legal rights.

Police officers should be in the schools to protect and serve our children, not discipline and interrogate. I think we need to look at the role of our Student Resource Officers and have a tough conversation about why our school administrators are not handling the discipline themselves.

I have already been working on the issue of police disciplining our children in the schools. My son's girlfriend and her friend were involved in an altercation in their school and the police got involved and physically manhandled a group of girls. I advocated for these students and tried to talk to the administration about how quickly these situations are escalating to violence in the schools.

I will always use my voice and my position to bring attention to this fact. It has affected me personally and this school-to-prison pipeline is part of the larger problem of mass-incarceration which is hurting our communities.

Page 6: Question 4: Health Insurance

Q5

Virginia's Children's Health Insurance Program (known as FAMIS in Virginia) and Medicaid provide low-income children with health insurance that their families would otherwise be unable to afford. If the federal government cuts payments to the states for Medicaid and/or FAMIS, how would you support the health needs of low-income children?

I already believe we need Medicaid expansion and a plan to cover the "coverage gap" for low-middle income families. There's an added need to provide for children's healthcare and support the children of low-income people. Republicans can argue that poor people make bad financial choices but children aren't responsible for their behavior or their finances.

If the Federal government cuts Medicaid or FAMIS, I would do everything in my power to come up with money from other parts of the budget to cover the healthcare needs of children and especially our most vulnerable children. If federal taxes go down as a result of cutting Medicaid or FAMIS, I would consider raising state taxes to make up for the loss to our state medical costs.

I do not know everything about this issue but we should expect to cover the cost of keeping our population healthy, especially those who may not be healthy without our help.

Page 7: Question 5: Opioid Epidemic

Q6

Substance abuse by parents affects both the parents and their children. Brain research shows that positive attachment between a parent and child in the first few years of life is critical to the child's healthy brain development. Substance abuse can significantly impact those early bonds between parents and children. If elected, what policy solutions would you promote to address the needs of the whole family?

I think the first step to solve the opioid epidemic is to reform our criminal justice system. We are locking more people up for non-violent drug offenses than for any other reason. The state needs to start treating opioid addiction as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice issue. When we lock people up for nonviolent drug offenses, we take them away from their children and their spouses.

For low-income families, losing one parent or spouse for any amount of time puts the family in a worse financial situation, and that instability adds to the instability of raising a child with one parent present. This puts stress on the other parent, and with one less parent, even one who's addicted to opioids, that child will have less supervision and is more likely to end up addicted to drugs or committing crimes themselves.

I would work to reform the criminal justice system and divert drug users to programs that help them become better parents and spouses who can provide for their families and improve their situations. We need to look at our drug diversion programs too, but that is the place for people who have addictions.

Page 8: Question 6: Cross-Systems

Q7

A child can interact with many systems (schools, health and mental health, courts, etc.) as they grow up. A Virginia Children's Cabinet has been established to facilitate cross-agency collaborations at the highest levels of state government. If elected, how would you facilitate this type of cross-agency collaboration for children?

I think a big part of our state government's role should be facilitating cross-agency collaboration in many areas. My child/children have interacted with schools systems, health and mental health systems. I have also advocated for children who interacted with the police in schools and with the courts.

Part of the problem is that when a child is sent to the next step, whether that's mental health services or a court, the people at that stage are trying to solve a holistic problem with a targeted solution. My son has a very high IQ but low processing. When he interacts with social workers, or mental health professionals, they want to pursue a certain avenue to help him. Each step in the process acts like they are the only step, including police who may want to pursue legal charges against the child for breaking a law.

If I am elected I would do everything in my power to facilitate more cross-agency collaboration and shine a light on those places where cross-agency collaboration isn't working or it's breaking down. I think the biggest problem is that we set up these systems and don't constantly monitor them to make our best-practices our standard practices. People should feel comfortable referring a child to a different department that might help the child more at the stage of development they're in, and the state government should be doing everything they can to promote that attitude. If people think that's the right way to do something, they're more likely to change their behavior.

Page 9: Question 7: Mental Health

Q8

In 2016, Virginia ranked 49th in the nation for the rate of youth with major depression who did not receive any mental health treatment. There are many barriers to quality mental health treatment for children, including: type of insurance, place of residence, lack of access and stigma. What do you view as the most significant barrier to effective mental health care for children and adolescents in Virginia, and how would you propose addressing this barrier?

I believe the most significant barrier to effective mental health care is a combination of stigma and lack of access. The first issue is that we actually discourage people from getting the help they need. We act like wanting help is a sign of a problem, so we're just pushing people away from the help they need.

The biggest issue that the government can address is the lack of access. If we can get past the stigma of mental health, we're still stuck with a health market that treats mental health as a specialty service rather than a normal health problem. That market needs to change, too.

If I am elected, I will put my effort into trying to close the gaps between how we deal with physical and mental health. I do not know everything about this issue or how we can make the markets more similar, but I know that if the state government signals that we want good doctors to take care of Virginians' mental health, more doctors will go into that field and take it more seriously.

Page 10: Question 8: Education

Q9

The achievement gap between lower income students and their higher income peers and between white students and students of color has been a persistent problem in Virginia that has recently worsened. How would you address the achievement gap in Pre-K to 12 education?

The achievement gaps based on race and socioeconomic levels are very disturbing. If we ever want truly equal education, we need to be watching out for barriers to equality that pop up in the gaps, that government programs can't anticipate.

In dense areas, there can be huge differences between schools that are only a few miles away from each other. One school will have brand new laptops and all the materials they need, while another will not have enough of anything, and teachers or parents have to provide their own supplies. A big part of this problem is funding and specifically teacher salaries. This is a state issue because the state oversees the whole education system. I would fight to put enough money into low-income school districts to hire and keep good teachers there. I would also use my position to shine a light on disparities between struggling, low-income school areas and their wealthy neighboring districts.

I would also use my status as an African-American legislator, and as a mother with school-age children, to speak about the truth and the severity of achievement gaps between black and white children. That gap exists even in areas with middle-class or upper-middle class black kids, who still do not get the attention or resources of overwhelmingly-white school districts.