

## **Arlington School Board Interview: Emma Violand-Sánchez**

**by: Lowell**

***Tue Apr 15, 2008 at 5:21:37 PM =DT***

The following interview is with [Emma Violand-Sánchez](#), one of six candidates for two spots on the Arlington County school board. The election for the Democratic endorsement -- tantamount to election to the board in this county -- is May 1 and May 3. I have invited all candidates to respond to the same questions. So far, Libby Garvey, Reid Goldstein, and Emma have responded. Also, I just want to state up front that RK has not endorsed anyone and we are not sure if we will endorse anyone in this race. With that, here's Emma Violand-Sánchez's interview.

P.S. There's a debate tonight sponsored by the Arlington County Democratic Committee. I plan to check it out.

### **1. Who are you and why are you running for the School Board?**

I am Emma Violand-Sánchez: experienced educator, parent and community leader. I came alone to the U.S. as a teenage immigrant, and later through hard work I earned my doctorate in education. I am proud to be an educator and the parent of two Arlington Public School graduates who are educators.

During my 30 years in education, I have been both a teacher and the Supervisor of Arlington's ESOL/HILT, a program for English Language Learners which is cited as a national model. Currently, I am an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University and the University of Virginia, and I am vice chair of the Board of Northern Virginia Community College. I was named a Fulbright Senior Scholar and an American Association of University Women Fellow. I have also published many articles on education and parental involvement.

My commitment to family learning has been at the heart of my work as a community activist. I have been privileged to provide the leadership for beginning several programs which serve families at both the state and county level. One such program is the Virginia Bilingual General Education Diploma, which has enabled many adult learners to obtain an equivalent high school diploma. In Arlington, I have provided leadership in the establishment of Project Family, for families with children 0 - 4 years of age. I also was a founding member of several nongovernmental organizations: the League of Latin America Citizens Council 4606, which funds Scholarships, Escuela Bolivia, Inc. offering educational programs for children, youth and parents; and the Mongolian School of the National Capital Area.

My community involvement has extended beyond the field of education, including the Red Cross, the United Way and the Committee of 100. I was honored to receive the James B. Hunter II human rights Notable Woman of Arlington Award and the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund's Community Service Award.

In summary, I am a long time Arlingtonian, up to date in educational research that can guide sound policies, and who has participated in local, state and national level commissions and organizations. Additionally, my multicultural background and my bilingual skills in Spanish, as well as my experience in family and community involvement, will provide the leadership needed on the School Board to serve a student body in which 40% speak a language other than English at home and where 52% are minority students.

I am running for the School Board because I want to continue contributing to our community. I believe that my professional experience and passionate belief in the power of education will contribute to the Board's work.

**2. What do you believe the Arlington School Board is doing well? How could it be done better?**

We have an excellent school system. We have highly skilled and dedicated teachers and administrators at schools across the county. Arlington parents and community members value education and support our schools. Student achievement has been rising, as measured by scores on Standards of Learning tests. Another important index, the number of students taking our most challenging courses, is also rising. There is a lot of work still to be done, however, because there is still an achievement gap. More critical still is the graduation gap. The percentage of white students who graduate is 95.5%, while among African American students the rate is 75.1%, Asians 88.8% and among Latinos 62.4%. All Arlington's students should high school and enroll in a postsecondary program, I believe that every student high school graduate must be prepared to succeed at the college level and in today's global workforce.

I want to ensure that families, teachers, counselors and partnerships with community organizations or colleges will create a supportive network for each student.

Students need to learn in an environment that is safe, healthy, challenging and engaging.

We need to continue to support Arlington educators to ensure educational excellence.

We now have an increasing number of students taking foreign language, and we are developing programs which will permit our students to start a foreign language in elementary school, and grow steadily in proficiency through high school. We need to expand the programs. I have extensive professional experience in second language acquisition and program implementation. More students need to graduate with foreign language proficiency and in-depth understanding of our multi-cultural world.

**3. What, if anything, do you believe the Arlington School Board is currently not doing well? How would you address these issues if you are elected to the School Board?**

In the past, the School Board seemed to work in close step with the Superintendent, staff and the community. The work of both the Board and staff generally followed the Strategic Plan of the school system. Schools benefited from the teamwork.

Sometimes at present there seems to be a disconnect between some School Board members, the Superintendent and parents. This was evidenced in the boundaries and capital improvement decision-making process. We do not seem to have short and long-range plan for important decisions such as boundaries and capital improvement plans. There are divisions in the Board that are not good for the school system.

In addition, we must make sure that the African American, Latino and Asian communities are involved in decision making, especially because Arlington has become a minority majority school system. I have a track record of involving minority parents in the school system. I have the bilingual skills to communicate with our Spanish-speaking students and families. We need to have a language access policy; currently we do not have one.

I will stress open communication between the School Board, County Board, parents and the wider community. I am a team worker; thus I will collaborate with other School Board

members and staff. We need to work together for the benefit of all students.

**4. What do you say are the top three challenges facing Arlington County school system right now, and what should be done about these changes?**

The first challenge, Elimination of the Achievement Gap, is one that the School System has been actively addressing through focus on the Standards of Learning tests. We need to continue to provide the highest quality education for all students, and to be sure that our expectations are high for each student enrolled in our schools. I would like to see us focus our attention now on the Graduation Gap. While 95% of white students who are enrolled in 9th grade become high school graduates, those statistics are far different for our African American and our Hispanic students. Finally, since ours is a minority majority school system, I see it as urgent for us to involve more minority families in decision making which takes place in our school system.

Secondly, we are challenged to meet the need for capital improvement. At present, the work begun at Yorktown must be completed. Students at Wakefield must be given the same state-of-the-art facilities as those at the other high schools. We must also design and renovate the facilities needed for the students of Thomas Jefferson and the Career Center. Additionally, there are students in the High School continuation program for whom we must provide urgently needed classrooms.

Finally, there is the challenge of resolving the school boundary issues. We must have an open and deliberate process for long term planning, involving the School Board, County Board, parents and the wider community, particularly when making significant decisions about educational facilities and school boundaries. The underlying principles which we must follow in these decisions start with fairness. Equity demands that all members of the communities affected have the opportunity for input, which should guide the School Board's actions.

**5. Anything else you'd like to add about your vision?**

My vision for the Arlington Public Schools is that of a caring, united, diverse community where students come first, where parents and teachers are supported and where school facilities are a community asset.