



## **Board of Education Candidate Survey 2021 Birmingham Municipal Election**

*Greater Birmingham Ministries invites you to complete this candidate survey. Your responses will inform our non-partisan 2021 Birmingham Municipal Election Guide, which will reach over 20,000 Birmingham residents. Please return your completed candidate survey to [electionguide@gbm.org](mailto:electionguide@gbm.org) by July 2.*

**Name:** Byron "Anti-Charter School" Lagrone

**District:** 3

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**1. Please provide a 2-3 sentence biography.**

Byron Lagrone is the Director of Engineering at Abel Healthcare Enterprises and a teaching assistant with the TEALS Program (Technology Education and Literacy in Schools, <https://tealsk12.org>). Byron grew up as the child of two educators and is passionate about maintaining accessible public education. As such, he is running on a platform that includes opposing the privatization of public schools, improving virtual learning options for students during the pandemic, increasing technology-based vocational training programs in the Birmingham City School system, and ensuring students with special education needs have adequate resources in school. Byron grew up as the child of two educators, and has a son enrolled in the Birmingham City School system who has attended Avondale Elementary, Glen Iris Elementary, and Epic Elementary.

**2. Please name any endorsements you have received.**

Alice Renee Speake, candidate for District 3 City Council, has endorsed Byron.

### **3. What do you see as the board's roles and responsibilities?**

As a Board Member, my first responsibility is to ensure that all students receive an education that helps them realize their goals in life. Board Members must make themselves accessible to all students, parents, and community members so that we can craft policies and programming based on the lived experiences and stated needs and goals of the community. All Board responsibilities, including passing an operating budget, hiring and working with the Superintendent, and setting a strategic plan, must be done in alignment with community goals. The objectives and key results (OKRs) set by the board ought to be evaluated on a quarterly basis, with post-mortems conducted alongside the community members we serve. Whether OKRs are evaluated board-wide or not, I will consider this a personal role and responsibility while a member of the board.

### **4. What are the biggest issues for students and families in your district and how would you address those issues in your role as a Board Member?**

The haphazard and inconsequential responses to the pandemic over time left parents and students adrift. Common feelings I saw expressed from parents included fear that their child would miss crucial development milestones, grief at missed social and environmental learning opportunities, and pity for the children stuck on multi-hour Zoom calls. The spectre hovering over those emotions was the frequently changing schedule expectations and guidance at basically every level of government, our municipality included. The worst example of this was the failed hybrid attempt in which children were brought back to school prior to Thanksgiving only to experience a spike in cases and deaths was tragic and avoidable. Although this was strictly opt-in, parents in America do not have the luxury of affordable childcare and frequently work multiple jobs. Therefore the opt-in served primarily as a way for the city government to avoid feeling bad about the onus they placed on the community.

Although the pandemic response overshadowed the other challenges we face in our district -- poverty, hunger, low teacher wages, high teacher turnover, inconsistent or nonexistent after-school programming, and more -- I consider these crucial to everyone involved in the educational process. And, with care and attention, these challenges can be overcome.

### **5. What role, if any, does the Birmingham Board of Education and Birmingham City Schools play in community and public safety?**

The educational experience plays a critical role in youth development, directly affecting the well-being of a community and its public safety. Socially well-adjusted students require the following: Active engagement in classes they enjoy; extracurricular activities where they are given the chance to thrive; safe places for physical group activities; internet; access to nutritious food, counseling, mental health access, transportation, and peers with access to the same benefits. The school system is a provider of all of those foundational experiences, and if any are missing the community as a whole suffers. The role of the Board of Education in the public safety space is to ensure that Birmingham City Schools receive the funding, personnel, and support they need to provide these critical services.

**6. As a Board Member, will you advocate for policies that protect queer and transgender youth? If so, how?**

I consider it critical that we protect and nurture the LGBTQIA+ community. Currently queer and transgender youth are on the receiving end of adult battles about their fate, especially as it relates to fundamental parts of the school experience (sports, bathrooms, extracurricular activities). Assigned sex at birth should not be a question educators are forced to ask and ought not determine a person's educational experiences. As a cis heterosexual white male, perhaps the most important part of my advocacy for these groups is listening to the people in those communities and ensuring school can be a positive experience for them by collaboratively crafting new policies and evaluating existing policies where those cause harm or could be improved.

**7. What is your position on charter schools?**

Unsurprisingly I, "Anti-Charter School" Lagrone, am firmly against charter schools. The degradation of public schools caused by charter schools in other cities and states -- see for example the 2017 decision in Oklahoma -- is crucial to understanding why charter schools are a bad idea. It's akin to gentrification in that a charter school may start flush with funds and motivated teachers because the owners know that this acts as a sales push for their organization. Because they are in a for-profit institution with low regulation it's only a matter of time before the motivations change and the school quality changes as well. Funding charter schools is a long-term gamble municipalities can only lose. Secondly, because charter schools are gated, there's a racial divide there that is especially pronounced in places like Alabama where people lived through desegregation, gerrymandered public school districts, etc.

**8. There is a national conversation on teaching Critical Race Theory in public schools to make public education more equitable. Do you believe the BCS curriculum should be changed to be more equitable? If so, how?**

We should teach our best efforts at an accurate version of world history to our students. As part of that effort, we should continuously evaluate our curriculum to ensure it is up-to-date and equitable. Critical Race Theory is the term for an academic theory about race and its intersection with law throughout history; the term became co-opted by a misinformation campaign and now the national discourse has become fraught and disconnected from the meaning of the term. I do want to be crystal-clear that Critical Race Theory is not taught in public schools in America, ours included. We can work to make Birmingham City Schools curriculum more equitable by amplifying voices America previously silenced -- those of native Americans, people of color, minority groups, LGBTQIA+ community members, and others. We should be able as educators to stand behind our teachings as students grow to

adulthood. The only way this can be done is to teach the raw story rather than a sanitized version that assuages a perceived national or personal guilt.