



“My Open Letter to Norfolk”

Shawn Wilkerson

Shawn Wilkerson is a retired Surface Warfare Officer. He works as a systems engineer, and serves as the Scoutmaster for Troop 1 in Norfolk. He and his wife, Jené, have three children in Norfolk Public Schools and he is a 2026 candidate for the Ward 2 seat on the Norfolk School Board.

For nearly 25 years I served in the United States Navy, a career defined by a simple, unyielding principle: Accountability. In the Navy, and more recently in my civilian career as a systems engineer, if a ship is off course or a system is failing, I cannot offer excuses. I cannot shift blame. And I certainly cannot cloud the reality of the situation and hope things get better. Instead, I take responsibility. I determine the root cause, I develop a plan, and I take action to fix it.

Today, as I consider the state of Norfolk Public Schools, I see a system that has lost its bearings as the result of mismanagement from our school board. The board members are our friends and our neighbors, and they are positioned to provide a valuable service to our community. However, the truth always leaves evidence. The evidence shows that nearly one-third of school-aged children in Norfolk are not attending Norfolk Public Schools and enrollment has been steadily decreasing. Yes, the population in Norfolk has decreased since 2000, but the rate of decreasing enrollment is FASTER than the rates of decrease in the population, the number of households with children under 18, and the number of school age children. Norfolk families are actively choosing not to enroll their school age children with Norfolk Public Schools.

We Need a Systems Approach, Not a Political One

We have all watched our student population decline by nearly 10,000 students since the early 2000's. This wasn't a sudden shift and it's taken no one by surprise. This has been a very visible trend for over two decades. Yet, both the appointed and the elected leadership on the school board failed to foresee the impact, resulting in surplus operating cost to tax payers of over \$70 million between 2018 and 2022 from operating under-capacity facilities. This cost has only increased over the past three years since it was revealed in the [Norfolk City Council resolution](#) and the initial response from the school board has been to maintain the status quo.

Worse still is the lack of urgency regarding the health of our children. When it was revealed in September 2025 that two board members ([watch this 11 minute segment](#)) fell ill due to air quality issues after visiting a local school, the response was not decisive action—it was more talk. In the Navy, if a compartment is unsafe, you move the crew and fix the problem immediately. As an engineer, if there is a design flaw which could compromise the integrity of the system, it is addressed immediately. *Acta non verba*. Our students and front line educators deserve that same level of protection from the school board.

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Your Vote Matters!

Recently, the outgoing representative for Ward 2 publicly [named a successor](#) to her seat. While I respect her many years of service to Norfolk, the school board is no longer a private club where you can select your friends for membership. Our School Board seat is not a hereditary office to be passed down, nor is it a political appointment decided in a closed-door meeting downtown—at least not anymore. This seat now belongs to you! I am campaigning because I believe parents, teachers, and taxpayers should choose their representative based on merit and vision, not on an elitist endorsement of the status quo.

My wife (Jené) and I have lived in Norfolk for over 20 years. Our three children attend Norfolk Public Schools (Granby, Maury, and the Academy at Rosemont). My wife has been a dedicated and active member of several PTA organizations for over nine years and has spent nearly five years as PTA President at two schools. Since retiring from the Navy in 2021, I have also had the honor of serving as the Scoutmaster for Scouting America’s Troop 1 here in Norfolk. We are deeply anchored in our Norfolk community. But like many of you, I am concerned by a School Board that seems more focused on avoiding negative news coverage and casting blame on circumstances (often of their own creation) than on the safety of our students and the stewardship of our taxes.

My Commitment to You

As your School Board representative, I will bring an engineer’s eye for detailed efficiency and an officer’s sense of duty to three core pillars:

Families First: Every decision will be viewed through the lens of the kitchen table, not the boardroom table. I believe families hold the primary responsibility for educating their children and determining the moral compass of their children. As a board member, I will respect that boundary and ensure the district focuses on its core mission. Families have choices. I acknowledge that the school system must earn the trust of Norfolk families to be their preferred choice in educating their children. If a policy, initiative, or partnership doesn’t support the student’s academic growth, personal development, or fails to respect the primacy of the family, I won’t support it.

Accountability: We will set goals for education and character development, establish measurable objectives, create aggressive plans and then be accountable for both the outcome and the process used to achieve the outcome. The school board must never abdicate or delegate its legal responsibility for oversight of every aspect of the

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school system whether it involves day-to-day operations or long term strategic planning. The board must embrace a radical honesty about the what, why, and how within our education process.

Transparency: We are spending nearly \$250 million on a new high school facility after the school board allowed the current building to fall into disrepair through a lack of foresight and planning for routine maintenance. The misguided decision to defer routine maintenance as a cost-saving mechanism has resulted in a predictable financial burden which will be carried by Norfolk tax payers for decades. We must have an "open-book" policy on how board decisions are made, what is happening in the classroom, and how our tax dollars are allocated.

I am not a career politician. I am not an educational administrator seeking to enhance my resume, and I am not a bureaucrat interested in protecting the status quo. I am not tied to any political interest group, and I have no further political aspirations.

I am a husband, a father, and a Norfolk taxpayer. I am a retired naval officer, a professional systems engineer, and a local Scoutmaster. I am a parent with three children in Norfolk Public Schools, a neighbor invested in Ward 2, and a proven leader who knows how to manage complex systems.

I am willing to ask the tough questions, and I am unwilling to accept mediocre answers that protect the status quo. I am now asking for your confidence, your support, and your vote to steer our schools toward a future defined by excellence without excuses, and to deliver a safe educational experience worthy of Norfolk's children.

Cordially,

Shawn Wilkerson

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