

## What Should You Look For In a School Board Candidate?

Whether you're satisfied with your school board or not, your vote in the next election can be instrumental in helping to shape the upcoming board so that it answers the needs of its parents, students, staff and the taxpayers. In this issue, Operation Wildfire looks at the roles and responsibilities of your school board, and provides things to consider when selecting candidates.

### The School Board

As required by the Pennsylvania School Code<sup>1</sup>, public school districts are governed by a school board that is comprised of directors who serve terms. In compliance with state and federal laws, school boards establish policies and regulations by which their schools are governed. Act 55 of 2017 now requires school board directors to complete training programs.<sup>2</sup>

Five key functions of a good school board<sup>3</sup> include:

- Set the vision and goals for the district.
- Adopt policies that give the district direction to set priorities and achieve its goals.
- Hire and evaluate the superintendent.
- Adopt and oversee the annual budget.
- Manage the collective bargaining process for employees of the district.

A typical school board meeting will include many business items, such as approving the school calendar, adopting curriculum, overseeing construction and approving contracts with outside vendors.

### Selecting School Directors (aka School Board Members)

You, responsible citizen, are standing in a voting booth. Along with other important positions, you see a list of names running for the school board in your district. You scan the list and realize that most, if not all, of the names are unfamiliar. *Hmmmm, you think, I have no idea who to vote for. Really, does it matter? It's just the school board.*

You're not alone. But there are many good reasons to care. School Directors are the decision makers – they determine the quality of the buildings where our children spend their days; they select the textbooks our children read and the online programs our children log countless hours on. They assess safety procedures during emergencies and choose the bus company that will safely take our children to and from school. They also decide whether or not the superintendent is doing his or her job.

If voting for a School Director *still* doesn't sound like a big deal, try this statistic: Only 10 percent of the voting population shows up to cast a ballot in their local school board elections. While that's unfortunate, there is an upside. Your single vote counts for more than in almost any other election because there is such a low turnout. Let's review what makes a good school board member.

### Characteristics of a Good School Board Member

According to Great!Schools.net, here are a few characteristics of a great school board member:

- Participates in setting the vision and goals for the district, and measures the success of the district and superintendent against those goals.
- Communicates their actions to the community. Through public discourse and written reports, great school board members keep the public informed of the district's progress and challenges.
- Works as a team. They collaborate well with others and are respectful of the other board members and superintendent.
- Adopts a fiscally sound district budget. They pay attention to finances and regularly monitor the fiscal health of the district.
- Focuses on what's best for all students, implementing policies that ensure success for everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania School Code, Codes and Regulations

<sup>2</sup> Act 55 of 2017: School Director and Trustee Training Programs

<sup>3</sup> Great!Schools.net

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Good school board members shouldn't see themselves as politicians nor should they have a political agenda. Instead, they should view themselves as public servants who focus on creating and sustaining a high performing school district. So who's running in your school district?

## Centre County School Director Candidates<sup>4</sup>

### Bald Eagle Area School District

5 Seats Available for Election

Democrat: Gary Heverly, Jr. (Incumbent)

Republican: Brandi Bartley  
Molly Hoover (Incumbent)  
Jason Penland (Incumbent)  
Erica Danneker

### Penns Valley Area School District

5 Seats Available for Election

Democrat: Nickelaus Engle  
Celesta Powell

Republican: Scott Butler  
Karla Groy  
Dan Hall  
Mike Pase  
Molly Miller  
Kim Kellerman-Domin  
Domer Smeltzer

Daniel Pick (PV Reg. 1)

### Bellefonte Area School District

5 Seats Available for Election

Democrat: Jennifer Barnhart  
Paul Dombrowski  
Julie Fitzgerald (Incumbent)  
Denelle Korin  
Donna Smith (Incumbent)  
Joseph Yech

Republican: Darrell Sharp  
Tim Kessling  
Patrick Buck  
Nate Campbell (Incumbent)

### Philipsburg-Osceola Area School District

5 Seats Available for Election

Democrat: Todd Jeffries  
District 2  
Tiffany Crane Warlow  
(Incumbent)  
District 4

Republican: Dr. Alex Boumerhi  
District 4  
Tim Bainey (Incumbent)  
District 1

### State College Area School District

5 Seats Available for Election

Democrat: Amy Bader (Incumbent)  
Gretchen Brandt (Incumbent)  
Anne Demo  
Dan Kolbe  
Aaron Miller  
Laurel Zydney (Incumbent)

Republican: Nathan Bish  
Barry Fenchak  
John Krajcovic  
Megan Layng  
Michelle Young

## School Director Candidates May Cross-File

There are five School Director positions up for election this year in each Centre County school district. Most candidates will be listed on both the Republican and Democratic ballots.

How is that possible? In July 1972 the state legislature passed Act 171 that allowed school board candidates to cross-file nomination petitions for multiple political parties. The reform argument was that cross-filing served as a mid-point between purely partisan elections and completely nonpartisan elections. In addition, academics maintained that politics and education were separate entities. The desire was to preserve the image of public schools as a unique nonpolitical function of government. Candidates may decide to file as a candidate on both the Republican and Democratic Primary ballots but they are not required to do so.

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<sup>4</sup> School Director Candidate names were determined from several different sources as of 4/13/2023. There may be changes.

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If a candidate chooses to cross-file, he/she is required to submit two sets of petitions with at least ten signatures from registered Republican voters on one petition and ten signatures from registered Democratic voters on the other. Candidates must recruit a volunteer to circulate a petition for the political party with which the candidate is not affiliated in order to obtain the required signatures from voters in the other party.

While Operation Wildfire has provided the political affiliation of each candidate for reference purposes, we believe strongly that School Director candidates should be committed to doing what's best for all students, parents, taxpayers and staff, regardless of political affiliation.

## H.R. 5 – Parents Bill of Rights Act

This bill outlines various rights of parents and guardians regarding the elementary or secondary school education of their children. The bill would require schools to publish educational materials such as catalogs of books kept in libraries and course curricula. Other provisions establish parental rights to request meetings with educators, address school board meetings and review district budgets. The legislation passed the U.S. House of Representatives on March 24, 2023 and is now in the U.S. Senate. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has said the Republican bill “will not see the light of day” in the Senate.”<sup>5</sup> We found the legislation at this link: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5/text>

## Take Action

There are several ways that you can learn more about the men and women who want to serve on your district's school board:

Visit the county political party website and/or Facebook page. Visit the candidate's website or Facebook page.

Visit the Facebook page or send an email to one or more of the following:

- Win4Bellefonte or [Win4Bellefonte@gmail.com](mailto:Win4Bellefonte@gmail.com)
- The Valley's Voice or [educ18all@hotmail.com](mailto:educ18all@hotmail.com)
- SlateforState.com
- United4SCASD or [United4SCASD@gmail.com](mailto:United4SCASD@gmail.com)

Participate in The League of Women Voters Candidate Forum.

Meet the candidates in the contested races for Bellefonte and State College Area School Director:

Tuesday, April 25  
State College Municipal Building  
6:30 p.m. and Live Broadcast on C-NET

You may submit questions to the candidates. If you are unable to attend, send your question(s) to: [LWVCentreCounty@gmail.com](mailto:LWVCentreCounty@gmail.com). In the Subject line, state the race to which your question(s) should be addressed (e.g., Bellefonte School Director). Questions must be received by Tuesday, April 18.

What questions could you ask? Here are ten questions to help get you started:

- In an era of more limited financial resources, how will you enlist support for board issues or public school spending from the taxpayers with no children in the public schools?
- What are the district's greatest capital needs right now and how do you believe they should be addressed?
- What made you decide to run for school board and what are your qualifications?
- What would be the first thing you would change while on the school board? What would you keep the same?
- How will you communicate with the community regarding school board issues?
- How familiar are you with the curriculum being taught in our schools?
- What do you believe are the top needs in our district?
- Do you support the Parents Bill of Rights Act?
- How will you address the different needs of all students?
- What is your vision for education in our community?

**Coming Next:** Operation Wildfire looks at the judicial candidates.

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<sup>5</sup> CNN.com, “House passes GOP education bill that aims to provide additional oversight for parents”, 03/24/2023.