

2020 SCEA/SCPA School Board Screening Questionnaire

Candidate: Katie Hockert

1. Why are you running for the school board? In your opinion, what is the most important role of a board member?

We are in an unprecedented era in education. As a district, we must take full advantage of this moment to reevaluate what is working and what is not, who is being served and who is not. We need leaders who trust the professionals and govern in ways that serve students and teachers first.

Communities who care about their future invest in great schools. That investment must be carefully managed and cultivated to ensure our district remains on stable financial footing for generations to come.

Strong schools have clear expectations for their students, faculty, and leadership. Responsible leaders, governed by thoughtful policy, hold individuals accountable for their actions in ways that allow them to make amends and grow. We are at a critical moment in time for education and we need visionary leadership who have skin in the game.

The most important role of a school board member is to create a vision for the district that ensures the best quality education for our students. Our district needs to get back to focusing on students first and supporting the teachers and staff doing the critical work on the ground.

2. Why are you seeking our endorsement? What does the unions' endorsement mean to you personally?

A union endorsement is incredibly important to me. I believe educator voices are often drowned out, overridden, or not sought by those who govern. This is a disservice to our students because teachers and paraprofessionals are speaking from the most relevant experience directly from their classrooms in real time.

I am in this race for school board to be that empathetic ear and champion of those doing the work on the ground with our students. A union endorsement would be an honor. Ultimately I'm a candidate who is here to listen then act in ways that support teachers and paraprofessionals. I humbly ask St. Croix Education Association and the St. Croix Paraprofessional Association for your endorsement as I run for the Stillwater Area School Board. Thank you for your consideration.

3. How has your racial identity shaped and informed your world view? How are you actively working to expand your own racial and cultural lens?

This summer, I helped organize a memorial march for George Floyd in Woodbury. I was moved by an impassioned plea from Walter Dobgima for residents to stand up with him to end racial injustice. I joined his Woodbury for Justice and Equality group on Nextdoor on a Sunday and volunteered to help organize a family friendly march. I am very new to activism but am not new to witnessing inequality, racism, and white privilege in my own life and through classroom experience. This summer changed me from passively reflecting, observing, and discussing racial injustice to taking action. At this moment, we all need to stand up because my silence is allowing an unfair system to thrive.

Since June, our group has grown and I have assumed the role of community outreach coordinator. Our mission is to educate people about the areas of inequity in Woodbury, then take meaningful action to seek the changes that are needed. We incorporated in July and I conducted a survey of our group members which I presented in a small listening session on August 1. After the session, we were criticized for being too cautious in our approach to activism. I plan to continuing working with the group to pursue equity in our community and keep trying to get it right.

4. As put forth as a model by the Minnesota School Board Association, what does governance mean to you in terms of Board work and the role played by a School Board member?

If elected to the school board, I understand my role will be to govern, not micromanage. I have so much to learn about the inner workings of our district and really reflect on how resources are being used. I believe the community has done important work through the CDT. Those recommendations do need to be readdressed through the lens our current health and economic crisis but it is a fantastic place to start.

5. What has been your personal involvement or knowledge regarding unions and collective bargaining? How would you, as a school board member, interact with union leadership?

Unions are the voice of the teachers and paraprofessionals. Their job is to amplify teacher concerns and support their members. While I absolutely value those voices, as a board member I must balance the needs of the district as a whole and the funding available to ensure it is stable and well managed. I know contract negotiations are overdue. I hope that both sides will come to the table willing to work to find a solution that will serve the district in these incredibly unprecedented times.

I was a member of Madison Teachers Incorporated. In 2011, I joined my union in a statewide protest against Act 10, the Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill which severely limited teacher union authority. Faced with the reality of losing our union, I became keenly aware of the important role unions played in amplifying teacher voice. It was a transformational experience for me. Teachers were vilified by the community and harassed by counter protesters. The hatred I witnessed toward the teaching profession cut me to the core. I had to defend my profession to everyone including members of my own family. It was eye opening how quickly individuals who spoke of the importance of education pivoted and assailed those who devoted their lives to it. Amid the chaos came the most unique learning opportunity for my students. We sat together in the crowded rotunda and learned together as everything unfolded. Ultimately the bill passed quietly once the protests subsided and we went back to work. It was a defeat and hearing from colleagues who are still in the district, the impact has been substantial.

6. Share examples of systemic and institutional racism that you have experienced or observed in Stillwater public schools. How will you work toward dismantling those barriers?

My only experience in a Stillwater public school has been at Brookview and I have found that school to be exceptionally welcoming to all its students. I did see a picture of the multicultural flags in the Brookview gym, which represent the different nationalities in our school, shared on social media by a community member with a disparaging comment about the amount of diversity now in the district. That made me painfully aware of the attitudes of some members of the greater community and their attitudes towards my neighbors in Woodbury.

The student letter testifying to the experiences of some black students also caught my attention and confirmed my suspicion that racial prejudice is alive and thriving in Stillwater schools as well. Their letter gives the leadership an opportunity to engage in conversations with staff and students around how to better support our BIPOC as well as other marginalized students. It is clear that our district needs work in cultural competency at all levels, board included. When students do not feel valued in school, their whole educational experience is impacted. As we work to close the achievement gap, our district has a rare opportunity to address unseen but destructive forces working against achievement. Discussions around race and personal bias are a minefield of shame triggers. We must approach tough conversations with empathy and opportunity to grow from mistakes, but most importantly, we cannot allow any injustice to go unaddressed and unresolved. We will build critically important connections with our students and community by ensuring that everyone feels welcome.

7. How do you think decisions should be made that impact curriculum, assessment, staffing, and school management? What is the role of teachers? What is the role of paraprofessionals? What is the role of administration? What is the role of School Board members?

In a great school district, there is a chain of command in place to delegate responsibility based on professional expertise and mutual trust. The role of school board members is to work together to create a vision for the district. Bring together multiple outside perspectives from the community to support the district based on some common principles. The board also must review and assess current policy as well as update with new ones as our community and social climate changes. That policy must set clear expectations that must be adhered to by everyone in the district, board included. When people make mistakes, we need a system of accountability that leaves room for growth and reconciliation. Beyond vision, policy, and oversight, the board should take an interest in curriculum, staffing, assessment, and management but ultimately trust the individuals tasked with those duties to do their jobs.

Teachers and district administration work in tandem to research, pilot and ultimately recommend to the board a curriculum package that best fits their departments after the rigorous vetting process. It is time consuming and exhaustive when done well and the board should ask questions to ensure that process was thorough. If it was, the board should support the recommendations. I do not support rogue efforts to present alternative curriculum options at the end of the vetting process that undermine the efforts of a curriculum committee.

School principals primary roles include ensuring proper staffing in a timely and efficient manner. They also must build trust through clear communication of expectations to their staff and students and have hard conversations to hold everyone accountable. This models a healthy learning environment where all individuals can make mistakes but must face them and grow from the experience. This is a delicate process of building strong relationships and supporting staff whenever possible. A well run school with a strong principal is critical to the morale of the staff and the atmosphere of the school and everyone benefits from it.

Classroom assessments become tools for teachers to read their learners and adjust their lessons or approach. Paraprofessionals become particularly helpful in watching how accessible those assessments are for the unique needs of the students they serve and offer feedback to teachers and administration. Paras have a valuable lens into the social emotional well being of their students and can be a great resource and support for teachers.

Standardized assessments should be thoughtfully vetted by teachers, administration and the board to ensure the beneficial data gained will be worth the time invested by students and staff. We must be mindful of the value but also the costs of standardized testing. Ultimately, the school board should monitor the data collected through testing to ensure our schools are meeting or exceeding expectations. However the tests are only a small part of the puzzle and board members must go back to the staff to understand where added supports are needed to meet the established benchmarks.

8. How do you define collaboration? What does collaboration look like to you among your fellow board members?

Collaboration is the act of coming together with others to create something. The key to good collaboration is all members involved must be open to discussion and have a growth mindset. When we pool our talents and perspectives, together we create far superior outcomes. Ultimately collaboration is about producing something meaningful to all members by the end because it has contributions from everyone involved.

Watching the dysfunction on our current board, I am keenly aware of how important civility, respect, openness, and connection are. Once relationships and communication break down, we all lose. If elected, I want to find ways to connect with individuals who disagree with me so we can all set a great example for our community because they are watching.

9. What steps would you take to actively work on trust-building with each of these groups?

a. District Administration b. District Staff including paraprofessionals, custodians, food service workers, counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, secretaries, school bus drivers, early childhood educational assistants, community education staff, technology support staff, nurses, teachers c. District Students/Families, including racially, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students and families d. Fellow Board Members e. Community at Large

Rebuilding trust is one of my core platforms and it's desperately needed in our district. Responsible leaders hold individuals accountable for their actions in ways that allow them to make amends and grow. Just like in a classroom or family or work place, clear professional boundaries are essential for healthy relationships. Today's culture has us so interconnected that personal and professional boundaries constantly intersect and we are still figuring out where to draw new lines. I believe this issue has undermined trust and fueled division in our district. I see it play out during board meetings and we need people at the table who are open to discussion and compromise.

Hopefully getting new faces on the board and a new superintendent will allow for an essential reset in the district. I look forward first learning as much as I can about our district. I'd love to visit every school, talk to teachers, staff, principals, student, paraprofessionals, guidance departments, and as many others as possible to see and feel the culture in our schools. I have friends in the dual immersion program at Lake Elmo and believe that is a unique asset to our district. I particularly want to see how that program is doing.

10. Describe current and future initiatives that you feel are priorities for our district.

The most pressing initiative on the horizon is the 2021 levy renewal and bond proposal to rebuild Lake Elmo, build a second school in addition to Lake Elmo, and expand Brookview. These were the top items identified by the CDT and absolutely critical to serving the population explosion in the district. I am extremely concerned that the board has not began work on promoting and supporting this critical levy as a bare minimum. It is going to be even more challenging in our current economic climate to ask for more money but we must find a way to properly fund our schools.

Beyond funding, I feel the next few years will be such a great opportunity to get creative, experiment, and learn together--teachers, support staff, building staff, students, parents, administrators, board members and community members. I want so badly to be part of this exciting and terrifying time. I believe we need leadership who is looking forward and open to finding new ways to approach education. If we end up with leadership that is focused on getting back to the way things were before March, families will leave. The public has taken notice of our district and we are in crisis. Furthermore, families are now exploring other options to educate their kids. With the added competition, we need to step up as a district and remind families the value they get for choosing our amazing schools. Stillwater may have the oldest district in the state, but let's show Minnesota we only get better with age.

11. In the next five years, there are bound to be greater economic challenges facing public education in Minnesota and in our district. How do you propose to address these challenges?

We are in a transformative moment in history and education. We are in a unique situation to totally reevaluate how education works for our community and our community is engaged as well. The reality of severe economic hardship is upon us and education has been underfunded for decades. It is time for us as a district to seize the moment and pioneer new ways of educating our students. As a board member, I need to find opportunities to communicate with the public and listen to their perspectives, while also advocating for the needs of the district and the value taxpayers will get for their investments. The initial reaction will be for people to tighten their belts and vote against more funding when the district must renew their critical levy and further ask for a bond to rebuild Lake Elmo and expand Brookview. As board members, we must find common ground between the district and community and increase our revenue sources. We also need to seek out other revenue sources available from the state and possibly federal levels to keep our district afloat. I know times are tight, but we are also in a unique space to remind the public of how much schools actually do for our communities. That conversation should be honest and include what types of services will be cut if new revenue sources are not found. This will impact our district and our entire community for the foreseeable future. It's a huge, heavy lift, but we cannot afford to drop the ball on this.