

Questionnaire



To be filled out by ALL candidates seeking REA/RESPA's recommendation.

Candidate's Name: Emily Whalen

Position Sought: RPS Board of Education Committee to Elect Emily Whalen

Name and Address of Candidate Committee: 279 Summit St, Rockford MI 49341

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Date: 6/18/26

Please answer each question below in 500 words or less:

1. Describe an effective relationship between the board of education and central office as well as between the Board of Education and other staff groups in our district?
2. MI School Code states that "The public schools of this state serve the needs of the pupils by cooperating with the pupil's parents and legal guardians to develop the pupil's intellectual capabilities and vocational skills." What does "cooperation with parents" look like to you in practice?
3. Please outline your budgetary and instructional priorities for RPS as specifically as possible.
4. What do you believe RPS can do to increase student enrollment?
5. If elected to the board, what are your top 3-4 objectives?
6. REA and RESPA have a unique, collaborative working relationship with Central Office staff and our Board. Share your perspective on the role of REA and RESPA in influencing school policy and decision making.
7. In the event of significant budget cuts, how would you prioritize resources and make funding decisions while maintaining progress toward RPS's long-term educational, operational, and facility goals?

1. Describe an effective relationship between the Board of Education and central office as well as between the Board of Education and other staff groups in our district.

An effective relationship begins with a clear understanding of roles. The Board of Education is responsible for setting vision, policy, and accountability, while the superintendent and central office are responsible for implementing board policies and managing daily operations. The board should provide clear expectations, ask thoughtful questions, and evaluate outcomes without becoming involved in day-to-day management.

Equally important is maintaining strong relationships with all staff groups. Teachers, support staff, administrators, and other employees are closest to the work happening in our schools every day. Their expertise provides valuable insight into what is working and where challenges exist. The most effective boards create an environment where staff expertise is respected and considered as part of the decision-making process.

As a board member, I would prioritize regular opportunities to hear directly from staff through surveys, listening sessions, and building visits. While individual board members should not direct staff or intervene in operational matters, they should actively listen and use that feedback when making policy and budget decisions.

I believe open communication is essential. Staff should feel confident that their voices are heard and valued, and the board should be committed to creating environments that allow employees to be successful in serving all students.

2. MI School Code states that “The public schools of this state serve the needs of the pupils by cooperating with the pupil's parents and legal guardians to develop the pupil's intellectual capabilities and vocational skills.” What does "cooperation with parents" look like to you in practice?

Schools and families share the same goals in wanting what is best for our students to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Cooperation with parents means recognizing that parents are the experts of their children and that educators are the experts in teaching strategies and techniques.

In practice, cooperation starts with clear, timely, and transparent communication. Parents should have access to information about curriculum, policies, academic expectations, student progress, and opportunities to become involved. Communication should be proactive, not only when concerns arise. I often have asked to meet one-on-one with my son's teacher before school starts so we can get to know each other on a

personal level, and I can discuss his strengths and struggles to help set him up for success in the year ahead. I have always appreciated teachers being open and welcoming to this type of engagement with me as a parent.

I strongly believe schools should make it easy for parents and community members to volunteer and support student learning. Strong volunteer programs can provide additional support for classrooms, school events, mentoring opportunities, and extracurricular activities while strengthening connections between schools and the community. Families should have multiple ways to share their time and talents with the district in ways that help teachers manage their students and resources, not create more work for them. Families can help alleviate time and resource burdens on districts.

Ultimately, cooperation is built on respect. Parents bring valuable knowledge about their children, and schools bring educational expertise. When both work together in partnerships, students benefit.

3. Please outline your budgetary and instructional priorities for RPS as specifically as possible.

My primary budgetary priority is ensuring that school funding be used for its intended purpose: supporting students and classrooms. As a Certified Government Financial Manager with experience in public sector budgeting, I believe every dollar should be connected to a clear purpose.

First, I would prioritize attracting and retaining high quality staff. Excellent teachers and support personnel have the greatest impact on student success. Competitive compensation, meaningful professional development opportunities, and access to the resources needed to perform their jobs effectively should be the number one priority. I support efforts to strengthen state requirements for teacher recruitment and retention through increasing salaries and tuition incentives, and I believe our district can do better in these offerings.

Second, I would prioritize classroom support. This includes evaluating opportunities to expand volunteer programs, partnerships with KISD, Bright Beginnings, libraries, and other local organizations that help teachers focus on instruction and student engagement. It also means that staff have the resources needed to be successful without having to rely on grant writing and outside funding.

Third, I would prioritize transparency and data driven decision making. Before making major budget decisions, I would want to understand the needs identified by staff, students, and families. Regular staff surveys can help identify areas where investments would have the greatest impact, as well as learning from other district success stories.

Instructionally, I support maintaining strong academic outcomes while ensuring students have access to diverse opportunities including career and technical education, fine arts, athletics, and extracurricular activities. Every student should have the same educational opportunities and support no matter what the school building within our district. I would like to see outdoor learning spaces utilized in all buildings as fresh air and nature offers many benefits for both staff and students. Resource rooms, speech and reading specialists and counseling dogs should be accessible to all students regardless of what building they attend. I believe in flexibility and pivoting when a pilot program may not be going the way it was intended and learning from missed opportunities. Ultimately, instructional decisions should be driven by educational professionals, student performance data, and community input.

4. What do you believe RPS can do to increase student enrollment?

Increasing enrollment begins with understanding why families choose Rockford and why some families choose other options. I would support gathering data through school of choice family surveys, exit surveys, and community engagement efforts to better understand those decisions.

Rockford has many strengths, including dedicated staff, strong academics, extracurricular opportunities, and a supportive community. We should actively communicate those strengths and ensure families are aware of the opportunities available to students. However, district communication should be intentional and informative rather than simply checking a box and calling it engagement. Families receive a significant amount of information from schools, which can make it difficult to identify what is most relevant to them. Effective communication should be targeted, meaningful, and designed to build relationships. True engagement means understanding the interests and needs of families and connecting them with opportunities that matter to them.

Retention I believe is even more important than recruitment. Families are more likely to stay when they feel heard, respected, and informed. Transparency, responsiveness, and positive school experiences all contribute to enrollment stability. With declining birth rates affecting districts across the state, I believe retention should be the first priority. Families who have positive experiences become the strongest ambassadors for our schools.

Lastly, I believe continued investment in student wellbeing, career readiness programs, extracurricular opportunities, and innovative learning experiences such as STEM and Odyssey of the Mind can help make RPS an attractive choice for families. In the end, enrollment growth is supported by strong schools, strong relationships, and a reputation

for listening to the community. I would like enrollment stability to be combatted first as an evaluated goal of the superintendent.

5. If elected to the board, what are your top 3-4 objectives?

My top objectives would be:

1. Strengthening transparency and communication by improving access to information, increasing opportunities for public and staff engagement, and ensuring community members understand how decisions are made. This includes budget versus actual summaries in the public board packets, committee meetings advertised and open to the public, formation of inclusive committees, and promoting responsible stewardship by ensuring district resources are allocated strategically and in alignment with student priorities and long-term financial sustainability.
2. Support students and staff by prioritizing resources that directly impact learning, employee engagement, student outcomes and wellbeing. This includes listening to staff and families through regular feedback mechanisms and responding to identified needs whenever possible, supporting nutritious food options, expanding outdoor learning opportunities and supporting positive student behavioral interventions.
3. Rebuild trust through representation and engagement by fostering respectful dialogue, seeking diverse perspectives, and helping ensure community voices are heard in district decision making. Ultimately, my role would be to learn, listen, and lead in a way that helps ensure every child has access to the opportunities and support needed to thrive at Rockford Public Schools.

6. REA and RESPA have a unique, collaborative working relationship with Central Office staff and our Board. Share your perspective on the role of REA and RESPA in influencing school policy and decision making.

REA and RESPA represent the voices and professional expertise of the employees who work directly with students every day. Their perspectives are most valuable because they can identify challenges and opportunities that may not be visible through data alone.

I believe REA and RESPA should be viewed as important stakeholders in district decision making. While the Board of Education ultimately has responsibility for governance and policy decisions, those decisions are strengthened when informed by the experiences and expertise of teachers and support staff.

Collaboration does not mean agreement on every issue, but it does require open communication, mutual respect, and a willingness to listen and have an open mind. I would support maintaining regular opportunities for dialogue so that employee perspectives can be considered early in the decision-making process.

The most successful organizations are those where leadership seeks input from the people doing the work. The district should create opportunities for staff reflection and feedback, recognizing that time is often one of the most limited resources employees have. By engaging REA and RESPA as partners, and allowing brainstorming and reflection time, the district can make more informed decisions that better support students and staff.

7. In the event of significant budget cuts, how would you prioritize resources and make funding decisions while maintaining progress toward RPS's long-term educational, operational, and facility goals?

In the event of significant budget cuts, my first priority would be protecting the core mission of the district: student learning. Budget decisions should be guided by what has the greatest impact on student outcomes while maintaining long term financial stability.

As a Certified Government Financial Manager, I believe difficult financial decisions should be made using data, transparency, and stakeholder input rather than across the board reductions. I would seek to understand which programs are producing the strongest outcomes, where operational efficiencies may exist, and what needs staff identify as most critical through surveys and direct engagement.

I would prioritize maintaining high quality classroom instruction, student support services, and the resources educators need to be successful. Research consistently shows that effective teachers have one of the greatest impacts on student achievement, so I would be cautious about decisions that increase class sizes, reduce instructional support, or limit professional development opportunities. Investing in staff development, mentoring, and retention would remain important because strong educators are essential to student success.

I would also explore creative ways to support teachers and students through community partnerships and volunteer engagement as I mentioned in question three. Rockford has a strong tradition of community involvement, and there may be opportunities to expand volunteer programs and mentorships that supplement district resources without compromising educational quality.

Regarding facilities, I would focus on maintaining safe, functional, and well-maintained buildings while carefully evaluating the timing and scope of larger capital projects.

Deferred maintenance can create larger costs in the future, so decisions should balance immediate financial realities with long-term stewardship responsibilities. I support investing in school facilities while ensuring resources are used efficiently and transparently. Maintaining a healthy fund balance can help mitigate unexpected financial pressures and facility needs during difficult budget cycles. I would support establishing a board policy that identifies an appropriate minimum fund balance to promote long-term financial stability.

Most importantly, I believe the process matters. Staff, families, and community members should understand the financial challenges facing the district, the options being considered, and the rationale behind final decisions. Transparency builds trust, and those closest to the work often provide valuable insights that lead to better solutions.

My goal would be to make thoughtful, strategic decisions that protect students, support staff, preserve community trust, and keep the district moving toward its long term educational, operational, and facility goals despite short term financial challenges.

When I refer to transparency, I mean making information and decision-making processes accessible, understandable, and available without unnecessary barriers. This includes timely access to board materials, financial information, policies, and meeting information so stakeholders can understand what decisions are being considered and why. Transparency also means communicating proactively, seeking feedback from all stakeholders before major decisions are made, and clearly explaining the rationale behind those decisions.