

School board candidates discuss issues

Tiffany Lankes, Staff writer 10:43 p.m. EDT October 23, 2013



(Photo: Tiffany Lankes)

Teacher evaluations, new state standards, charter schools and parent involvement are some of the biggest issues facing the City School District.

And they were the top issues that parents and voters raised during a Rochester Board of Education candidates forum on Wednesday.

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(<http://roc.democratandchronicle.com/interactive/article/20130814/NEWS01/308130049/rochester-city-school-board-election>)

Seven of the eight candidates who will appear on the ballot attended the event, which was hosted by graduates of The Greater Rochester Parent Leadership Training Institute and the League of Women Voters. Cynthia Elliott was the only candidate not in attendance.

"We all know how important it is for parents to express their concern regarding the education that their children receive," said Georgia DeGregorio, president of the League of Women Voters. "We are glad that the league can help voters be informed about these issues."

This year's election drew the largest field of candidates in at least a decade. Ten candidates competed for the three spots on the Democratic Party line during the September primary.

Along with the three who won the primary — Elliott, José Cruz and Van White — three of the other primary candidates will appear on the November ballot on other party lines. They are Howard Eagle and Ronald Hall, who are running on the Freedom Party line, and Candice Lucas, who is running on the Independence and Working Families party lines. Two others, Mia Hodgins and Lori Thomas, will appear on the Republican and Green party lines, respectively.

Voters will have a chance to cast their ballot for the three open spots on Nov. 5.

"People rarely understand the critical role that school board members play," said Kara Finnigan, an associate professor of educational leadership at the Warner School at the University of Rochester.

Finnigan talked about the role of the school board: hiring and firing superintendents, developing local policy, overseeing the implementation of state and federal policies and setting a budget.

"It is critical that parents understand the many roles of the board, as well as the ways to communicate with board members through formal and informal channels to ensure their voices are heard," she said.

Audience members posed questions to the candidates on issues ranging from the state's new Common Core curriculum and other mandates to their feelings on charter schools.

"If parents, kids and taxpayers want change and actual advocates, if they want to interrupt the pattern of apathy and disengagement, it matters greatly who is elected," said city parent Reuben Tapp. "An effective school board engages parents and kids to get more involved, and challenges the district's current structure and policies."

Here were some of the candidates' key points:

José Cruz, who has been on the school board for four years, said he will be able to draw from his experiences working with the community, as well as local and state policy-makers, to set and maintain high standards for city students. Part of that will involve coming up with innovative ways to improve the district to stay competitive with charter schools.

Howard Eagle, a longstanding education advocate, cautioned the audience to not be "bamboozled" by other candidates advocating for the status quo. He talked about his platform of getting back to basics such as reading, writing and math, and emphasized that he feels the new Common Core standards and other state mandates distract from that.

Ronald Hall talked about the importance of making better connections between the school board and community members, criticizing current members for not being involved with the schools. He also criticized what he sees as biased relationships between the board and certain community organizations and unions that have contracts with the district.

Mia Hodgins, whose main focus has been on the district's budget and curtailing rising expenses, talked about the importance of putting resources into programs that support a child's entire well-being. That would include healthy food in the cafeteria, and enrichment activities. She also advocated for a return to neighborhood schools, which would curtail transportation costs.

Candice Lucas, who has worked with the district for many years as president of its parent council, advocated for finding meaningful ways to involve parents in their children's education. She said that working with parents and teachers to come up with solutions and strategies for navigating new things like the Common Core is critical for the district.

Lori Thomas, a retired teacher, also talked about programs that target the whole child, including ones that meet their social and emotional needs as well as academic ones. She also advocated for improving communication with parents and for board members to stay more connected with the schools.

Van White, who joined the school board in 2007, said that board members do have to deal with the reality of state mandates and find ways to improve student performance in the face of them. He talked briefly about his plan for doing that, a proposal he calls "The Revolution," which includes key points such as hiring reading teachers in schools, smaller class sizes and a longer school year.

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