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By:

Noa Kuszai



Above, from left: Terah Chambers, Chris Martin, Thasin Sardar, Kath Edsall, Kate Powers, and Noel Garcia.

Six candidates for the ELPS Board of Trustees came to the Hannah Community Center last Wednesday evening to answer community members' questions at a League of Women Voters-hosted public forum.

Questions focused on major issues facing the District as well as how candidates would handle specific situations presented to them if they were on the School Board. The topics of discussion included possible introduction of a year-round school calendar, Schools of Choice, enrollment, diversity, current projects, how the school board should manage political referenda, and more.

People in the audience submitted questions, which were then rephrased by League volunteers and put to the candidates. Each candidate had one minute to respond, with the order of response rotated. Candidates also gave opening and closing statements.

When they were asked about switching to a ?balanced calendar? ? a longer school year with

shorter, more frequent breaks ? each candidate supported the idea, but some thought that the final decision would have to be made with input from the community, particularly considering that East Lansing is a college town.

?A lot of the parents and the people who depend on our schools have very long summers, and so I think before we adopt a policy like that, we need to have a lot of conversations with the community, the people who would be affected, to make sure that really is what the community wants,? said Chris Martin, a practicing attorney who taught for four years in New York.

Others, including Kath Edsall, a past Board member with a doctorate in veterinary medicine, think that a balanced calendar would be beneficial but that there are problems that they would have to address first, such as air conditioning for all of the schools and proper childcare during breaks.

Terah Chambers, an MSU professor in Educational Leadership currently serving on the Board, believes that a balanced calendar is something that would have to be approached with caution, due to the significant transitions involved.

Candidates were also asked about how they would handle the racial achievement gap in the District.

Kate Powers, the current President of the Board, talked about implementing professional development to help teachers develop school culture and programming that doesn't label some children as ?bad kids.? Edsall added that it was important to consider gaps in *opportunity* that might be addressed by schools.

Chambers, who studies the achievement gap professionally, said that students need ?diverse role models in teachers? to ?address test score gaps.?

While Martin suggested de-emphasizing standardized testing and improving teacher-student ratios through things like partnerships with MSU, Noel Garcia, a retired police officer and teacher at the Wilson Talent Center, suggested giving more resources to school counselors.

Garcia said his approach would lighten their burden and allow them to pay more attention to individual students. He also suggested focusing on student mental health.

Thasin Sardar, who volunteers in local school activities and works on community building, including through his work for East Lansing's Islamic Center, said he thought the redrawing of boundaries for the elementary schools would be very important in the achievement gap issue.

Sardar said the superintendent would need to find a ?balance in demographics? as the boundaries were redrawn. Sardar also praised the new Director of Curriculum for partnering with families to make instruction ?more relevant and engaging.?

When asked about how they would follow through with the promise of building five new elementary schools and renovating the sixth, candidates said they would pay much attention to budgets and progress. This led to the next question of enrollment and how they would handle Schools of Choice ? the program by which ELPS accepts children from other districts and is paid per-pupil by the State for doing so.

Sardar, who is interested in using good data to drive policy, explained that by incorporating Schools of Choice, the District can ?better utilize [its] resources,? a point also hit by others.

Garcia said that, while other districts may see Schools of Choice students as a ?burden,? East Lansing does not view them that way. He talked about how his sons began in ELPS as Schools of Choice students, at Red Cedar Elementary.

Chambers said that she wants to see the District treating all Schools of Choice students as if they live in East Lansing, and explained how the District goes about determining how many students to let in.

?Our District administration actually does a really careful classroom-by-classroom audit to see where we have space,? Chambers said.

Edsall added that, along with the audit, the teachers? contract also helps to determine class size. She also said that resources are looked at to see if they will be properly utilized.

Several candidates attributed the variety of activities available in ELPS to Schools of Choice.

?I think that the Schools of Choice students that are in our schools provide an extraordinary benefit,? Martin said. ?We have increased diversity. We have increased capability to offer things like extracurricular activities, athletic offerings, the arts. These are all things that might not be available to all of our students if we had a smaller student body.?

Incumbent Kate Powers concluded the round by saying that the School of Choice students ?bring a wealth to our School District.? Following on a comment by Martin, Powers noted that ELPS offers more AP class options than other nearby districts in part ?because of the stable student body? provided by Schools of Choice.

Next came a question about the School Board?s role in educating for or against state or federal legislative policies and/or initiatives that will impact public education.

In answering this question, several candidates alluded to ELi?s report on the Board?s recent split vote [2] on Michigan?s Proposal 2, the anti-gerrymandering proposal. Most supported having a school board take a stand on any political issue they see as important to students or the District.

Echoing comments by Chambers, Edsall, Garcia, and Martin, Sardar said that ?it also fits in with our mission of building world-class citizens and trying to empower our students to be model citizens and instill skills to be bold, to take a stance and to let them know that politics is a career which they can undertake.?

Powers stood out from the rest on this issue, indicating she believes in a more circumspect

approach.

?It depends on what we are advocating to support, it depends on how it directly affects our students and the day-to-day work that we take on as a public school district, and I think it depends on what we are allowed to do within the letter of the law as a public body,? Powers said.

All candidates spoke positively about the diversity of ELPS. Several candidates suggested the promotion and creation of programs that discuss race, ethnicity, gender, and more.

Edsall, who has raised eight adopted children in ELPS, spoke positively about changes in the District?s sex ed curriculum, and said it is absolutely critical that the District hire more African American teachers.

Edsall spoke about how important it was for children like her own African American children to have access to teachers ?who look like them,? and she pointed to the decline, district-wide, in the number of teachers of color over the last decade.

Chambers spoke to the same issue, mentioning how ?profound [an] experience? it was for her son to have had black teachers. She said white students also benefitted from having teachers of color, adding, ?We?ve talked about the need for diverse teachers, but we also need white teachers who are fluent in talking about race and don?t shy away, who will talk about it with kids, but the importance of teachers of color can?t be underestimated.?

The last question of the night regarded what the candidates believed to be the biggest challenge facing the District. Here, Garcia?s comments differed from the rest by speaking specifically to safety, particularly in light of shootings in schools.

According to Garcia, the Wilson Talent Center is implementing a new philosophy to school safety, one he wants to include in the District, namely ALICE, which he explained stands for alert, lockdown, inform, counter, and then evacuate. He added that, ?It?s no longer the traditional lockdown? approach, because that is inadequate to helping students and teachers survive assaults.

In response to the same question about challenges facing the District, Powers spoke as the current Board President, saying that although she believes that the District is doing well, the Board still has many issues to face.

?We know that mental health is a huge issue in our country and in our community, and so I think that we have the opportunity to address student mental health, we have the opportunity to address things, like the opportunity gap,? she said.

As the candidates made their closing statements, they sought to focus on what made them different and on their overall goals for the District. Powers suggested that the work she has done on the Board be considered as a good reason for her re-election.

According to Martin, his experience as a lawyer will bring a unique perspective to the Board: ?I go to court every day and I have to sweat the nitpicky details of a legal case while still focusing on the big picture.? He also said his experience as a teacher under No Child Left Behind helped

him understand the reality of what teachers face.

Sardar said he wanted to care for those who are economically disadvantaged and who have been denied opportunity, "not because of [school] ranking" but because this is the right thing to do. He wanted to "capitalize on the momentum" of the District and "be there for our kids, and not in the way of our kids."

Chambers said her interest in hiring diverse teachers and investing in mental health resources were reasons to vote for her, as were her professional qualifications and her dedication to the District. "I show up and I participate," Chambers said. "When I was appointed to the Board, my official role on the District bond committee ended, but I still go to those meetings as a public citizen every time. I continue to attend PTO meetings because I think it's important for people to see the School Board in their local schools."

Edsall said she believes her strength includes "a long history in the community," including in the schools as a parent. She noted that her children had attended almost every school in the District, and she has been active as a parent and previously served as a Trustee.

But, Edsall added, "I would also be a hypocrite with my passion for diversity and inclusion to not say that I think that as you look at this very diverse panel, you strongly consider making our School Board as diverse as our community is." She added, "I would love to earn one of your votes but consider the other candidates sitting at this panel if diversity is a passion for you."

Garcia said he is "in this because I have a lot to offer" and that he wants "to make sure every Trojan gets the same opportunity for education." He again emphasized his desire to focus on safety for students, teachers, and staff.

These six candidates are competing for four, four-year seats on the School Board. A seventh candidate's name "Todd Swales" will appear on the ballot, but as ELi reported last week, Swales has effectively withdrawn ^[3] from the race.

ELi has provided candidate profiles here ^[4].

Election Day is Tuesday, November 6, with voter registration closing October 9. To be eligible to vote, you must live in the ELPS District and meet the other requirements of registering to vote. Learn more about how and where to vote at the East Lansing City Clerk's website ^[5].

The Clerk's office is still looking for additional people to work at the polls on Election Day. Read more from ELi ^[6] about why people choose to work as election inspectors.

[Editor's note: this article was updated on October 18 to indicate that candidate Kath Edsall, and not Kate Powers spoke first about "gaps in opportunity" for ELPS students. It was also changed to indicate that one of the questions asked of the candidates was not about the Board's role in educating for or against state or federal legislative policies and/or initiatives that will **not** impact public education, but about the Board's role in educating for or against state policies and initiatives that **will** impact public education.]

Noa Kuszai is a graduate of ELi's Summer Youth Journalism Program and a student at ELHS. Read more about our reporting team here [7].

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