

Edmonds Education Association School Board Director Candidate Questionnaire 2017—Mitchell Below

Please answer the following questions and return to Andi Nofziger at anofziger@washingtonea.org no later than 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, August 29, 2017.

1. What do you believe are the purposes and responsibilities of school board members?

As a body, the school board sets the policies and priorities for the district, hires and evaluates the superintendent and other key staff members, approves budgets and contracts, assesses the district's progress toward student achievement goals, and communicates with community members to determine system needs.

2. What skills, talents, and experiences qualify you to be a school board member?

As a content editor/developer, I understand the importance of clear, concise, effective communication. The words we choose have the power to inspire collaboration around common goals, or to offend and divide. In my career, I have learned to be an effective listener. I interview subject-matter experts about complex topics and processes, ask the right questions to expand and clarify where necessary, then distill that information into content that is accessible to non-technical audiences.

As a retirement plan administrator, I learned the intricacies of benefit plans and tax law, as well as the investment vehicles underlying those plans. I was also responsible for calculating and allocating contributions, performing basic accounting functions, and explaining plan provisions to participants.

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with an Economics minor, from which I have gained an understanding of government and the legislative process. My interest in politics and public policy has led me to volunteer with the First District Democrats in a leadership role. Since being elected third vice chair, I have spoken with several of our state senators and representatives about issues such as education funding, the McCleary decision, paid parental and family leave, and regressive taxation. This access has given me further insight into the scope and depth of the issues before our state and district.

Lastly, I am parent of a first-grader at Maplewood. Though Maplewood is not in all ways representative of our district, as a classroom volunteer, I get a first-hand view of the challenges teachers face and the needs of their students. My twin daughters will enter kindergarten before this term expires. They were born 14 weeks premature and required a combined 199 days in the NICU before they could come home. Our time there made me sensitive to the needs of low-income, non-native English speaking, and working parents. I saw parents who struggled to balance their children's need for parental involvement with their families' need for them to work. Others worked hard to understand the complex medical needs of their children. Empathy for these children and their families has been a motivating force for me ever since.

3. When you consider that the majority of community members in the city of Lynnwood are persons of color, what will you do to include their voices and perspectives in district decision making? What do you believe are the best ways to ensure culturally responsive practices in our schools and our district office?

First and foremost, we must hire faculty and administrative staff that are representative of the diversity found in the community. If we are to ensure that their voices are heard, we must give them seats at the table. Secondly, we cannot be satisfied with just passively “listening.” We must recognize that there are systemic issues that discourage English-language learners and people of color from participating in board meetings, and actively break down barriers to their participation.

4. How do you intend to gather information on the most critical issues facing education today? How will you use this information to address the needs of students and educators in the Edmonds School District?

My brain thrives on input. I will seek out information from all outlets at my disposal: WSSDA bulletins and model policies, WEA and EEA policy positions, parent blogs and social media groups, books and scholarly journals, EdWeek and other publications, etc. My job as school board director will be to assimilate this information, then use it to inform my decision-making process.

5. Overcrowded classrooms and lack of space for instruction are critical issues facing Edmonds schools. If elected, what will you do about this?

The problem is one of resource allocation; we must match the resources we have (teachers, classrooms) with the needs we face (unevenly distributed student populations) in a way that optimizes class size. There are no easy solutions.

We can hire more teachers, perhaps prioritizing student populations that need more individual attention, but the state budget allocates salary to the district based on a prototypical school model that may limit how much we can increase faculty, to say nothing of the teacher shortage. And if we succeed in hiring more teachers, where will we put them? Adding more teachers to overcrowded schools will require relocatable classrooms in the short-term, and greater capital investment in new facilities in the long-term. Another, less palatable solution would be to redraw school borders or to bus students around the district to reallocate them to facilities with greater capacity.

My preference would be targeted hiring of teachers, coupled with long-term investment in new schools.

6. What role, if any, do you believe standardized tests play in our education system?

Standardized tests have a limited usefulness when trying to assess proficiency and growth in individual students. Assuming a test has been normed and shown to be relatively free of bias, it can be used to establish a baseline against which future performance can be compared.

The problems begin when those test results are aggregated at the class, school, or district level and used to evaluate teacher or school performance. Small sample sizes, student demographic variances, and differences in teaching materials and methods can complicate attempts at comparison. Additionally, when high-stakes decisions such as school closures and teacher retention are based on test scores, the wrong incentives are reinforced among teachers and administrators.

7. As a school board member, would you work or vote to bring charter schools to the Edmonds School District?

My research into the issue indicates that charter schools do not outperform public schools, yet they come at the expense of a loss of local control and paying a profit to their operators. To achieve this profit, operator often skim the students who are least expensive and most likely to succeed from the public school system, and hire uncertified and non-union faculty to keep labor costs down.

As a school board director, I would work to provide our district with the best system of public education possible, not outsource our responsibility to private, for-profit operators.

8. What are your views on collective bargaining and the role of unions in public education? Would you support bargaining sessions being open to the public?

I support the right of all employees to collectively bargain the terms of their employment. Collective bargaining gives employees a stronger voice in establishing fair compensation, benefits, and working conditions.

While I value transparency in government, I am concerned that opening bargaining sessions to the public would lead to more, not less, contentious negotiations. I am skeptical that it would have the moderating effect that its proponents claim, and that other more nefarious motives are behind their efforts. As a board member, I would represent the public in observing bargaining sessions, and if either side were bargaining in bad faith, I would ask the board to collectively take steps to correct it.

9. As more money becomes available from the State, what are your priorities for allocating additional resources to have the greatest impact on student learning?

Until the legislature provides more guidance around how enrichment levy dollars may be spent, I find this question difficult to answer. Much of the district's revenue comes earmarked for certain purposes, such as salary and special education. Where the district has discretion in spending, I would advocate allocating revenues to provide greater equity: expanded pre-school offerings for low-income and ELL students, increased transportation for IB and STEM students who live outside the Edmonds-Woodway and MLT high school boundaries, and more nurses, counselors, and reading specialists to address the needs of at-risk students.

10. How do you intend to collect information to provide effective oversight regarding district financial and personnel decisions, as well as decisions about district initiatives?

I will compare notes with board members, teachers, and administrators from neighboring districts of comparable size and composition (e.g., Northshore, Lake Washington, Everett) to establish best practices. I will participate in WSSDA conferences and seminars to better understand the issues facing board across the state. I will draw on my personal and professional network which includes current and former teachers and administrators, legislators, and parents. Lastly, I will seek input and advice from members of the ESD community.

Thank you for considering me for your endorsement.

Sincerely,
Mitchell Below