

8 Democratic candidates vying for spots in city school board primary

12:29 AM, Sep. 11, 2011 |

At a time the City School District faces record budget deficits, a search for a new superintendent and increasingly tougher state and federal mandates, the leaders who sit on the school board will play a critical role navigating the challenges of today's education system.

And this year, four of the seven school board seats are up for grabs. Ten candidates have entered the race, eight of whom will compete for the spots in Tuesday's Democratic primary.

The field includes four incumbents who say that consistency is essential to helping the district stay on track with its reforms, including new programs they believe will help improve student performance and lead to more students graduating from high school.

But their challengers disagree.

They say lackluster graduation rates — just 51 percent of students finish high school in a typical four years — and a structural budget deficit prove the current school

board is failing.

On Tuesday, voters will have their say. Here is a look at the candidates and where they stand on key issues facing the district:

Newcomer Mary Adams is a research nurse at the AIDS Clinical Trials Unit at University of Rochester Medical Center and the mother of three children, two of whom attend city schools. She has made a name for herself on the local education scene as an activist with the Community Education Task Force. While the group started as a grass-roots effort to protest mayoral control of the school district, its members have since become vocal on issues including budget cuts, standardized testing and pushing the district to release internal audits on its operations. Adams is one of three candidates running as a slate for the task force.

Adams said that at first she was hesitant to get into the race, but strongly believes that change is necessary to correct a failing system. The task force advocates for

Advertisement

Make it Yours™

Browse thousands of designs for over 3,000 devices.

Get 15% off with code: SAVE15

Browse Designs

skinit

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

addressing the issues associated with poverty that affect children in the city schools, where 88 percent of students receive free or reduced price lunch, the education system's measure of poverty.

"Clearly, fundamental changes do need to be made in the city schools," she said. "You cannot dismiss poverty. The only way we can possibly do it is to build a movement."

Incumbent Melisza Campos is finishing her first term on the school board. During that time, she has become an advocate for issues affecting Latino children and pushed for stronger health and wellness policies for students.

On a board sometimes criticized for grandstanding and infighting, Campos said one of her greatest assets is "quiet leadership." She said she works hard to collaborate with other school board members and district leaders behind the scenes, rather than publicly.

She said her biggest frustration has been trying to bring change to a system that is often resistant to it.

"You go in there thinking you can get all this stuff done," she said. "We can't do anything without a majority."

Campos is vice president of operations and instruction for Dale Carnegie Rochester and has two children, an infant and a toddler.

Education activist Howard Eagle has become a familiar face at Rochester school

board meetings, in the last year speaking out against things such as budget cuts and a proposal to close two city schools. Like Adams, he is running on the Community Education Task Force slate, and says that addressing the poverty issues that affect city students is critical to helping them succeed in the classroom.

This is the retired city school teacher's fourth time running for elected office. He has two children in the city schools and one who graduated from them.

"We really believe the current leadership is out of touch," Eagle said. "It's going to take a movement."

While Eagle is well-known for his sometimes dramatic and aggressive activism — he helped coordinate a protest outside school board President Malik Evans' house and recently engaged in a shouting match with Evans at a meeting — he said that is not reflective of the behavior he would exhibit if elected to the school board.

Advertisement

Make it Yours™

Browse thousands of designs for over 3,000 devices.

Get 15% off with code: SAVE15

Browse Designs

skinit

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

Malik Evans has served two terms on the school board, with several years as its president. When he was first elected in 2003, he was the youngest person ever to be elected to the board.

Evans said that his leadership skills have been most evident in the past few months. In that period the board had to deal with former Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard's departure and find a replacement, while at the same time manage unprecedented budget cuts.

"I remember going outside that day and saying when it rains, it pours," he said.

One of the issues Evans is most outspoken about is the concentration of poverty in the city schools, and he said that in his next term he would like to push other local leaders to consider better integrating schools in Monroe County, possibly instituting a cap on the poverty rate.

He is a vice president at M&T Bank and the father of an infant.

A lifelong city resident and the father of eight children, Ernest Flagler talks openly about his history with gangs, drugs and as a teen father. He said those experiences have helped him understand and relate to the challenges students face and would help him become a better leader.

"I came through," he said.

He is an advocate for more parental involvement in schools and said if elected

to the board, he would make school safety a priority. He also thinks the district needs to return to a neighborhood school model and make schools a part of communities, rather than busing students throughout the city. He is a firefighter with the Rochester Fire Department.

First elected to the board in 1997, Willa Powell is the longest-serving member of the school board. She said her institutional knowledge and experience working with the city schools over that period of time gives her a unique perspective that serves the district.

"It was at that point that I really took the role of historian seriously," she said.

She counts as her greatest contribution a policy manual for parental involvement, although that issue remains a challenge in the schools. As chairman of the board's finance committee, she pushed her colleagues to make cuts to things such as transportation and summer school to try and restore art and music teachers.

Advertisement

Make it Yours™
Browse thousands of designs for over 3,000 devices.
Get 15% off with code: SAVE15

Browse Designs

skinit

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

Powell is a retired captain and personnel officer with the U.S. Army Reserves. She has four children, two of whom are still in the city schools.

Wallace Smith is the third candidate running on the Community Education Task Force slate, and said his experience working with the Freedom School gives him a unique perspective on how schools can work with communities to address health and social needs that affect students' academic performance.

The program, which is no longer funded by the City School District, is now seeking status as a charter school. He has had several students go through the city schools.

"They say it's about the students, but they really don't walk that talk," he said.

"The current board has failed us. Look at the statistics. It's obvious that we need reform."

Finishing his first term on the board, Allen Williams has earned a reputation as one of its most critical members, often questioning and challenging district leaders on issues involving school spending.

As chairman of the audit committee, he pushed the board to release internal audits of district operations.

He was one of two board members who supported a proposal to dissolve the school board and turn control of the district over to the mayor, saying that he believes

the current system is not working.

He is chief financial officer for Brown & Hutchinson law firm. He has two children who graduated from city schools.

TLANKES@DemocratandChronicle.com

Follow education news on Twitter
[@TiffanyLankes](https://twitter.com/TiffanyLankes)

Coming Monday

Find out about several other primary races in Monroe and Ontario counties that will be decided by voters on Tuesday.

Advertisement

Make it Yours™
Browse thousands of designs for over 3,000 devices.
Get 15% off with code: SAVE15
15% OFF
Browse Designs
skinit

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™