

SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES DISCUSS BETSY DEVOS, LOCAL FUNDING SHORTAGE

May 16 election to fill three open 4J school board positions BY JESLYN LEMKE

Candidates in the race for the Eugene's 4J School District board — a four-year-long commitment — are not happy about the Feb. 7 appointment of Betsy DeVos as the nation's secretary of education. Add to this the recent protests of Latino families lobbying the 4J school board to do more against the harassment of immigrants, and the May 16 board election has some weighty issues to address.

As of Feb. 9, four people have filed for one of three open positions on the seven-member board, which makes decisions on funding and hires the superintendent for 4J's Eugene schools.

The candidates are Jerry Rosiek, Evangelina Sundgrenz, Mary Leighton and incumbent Anne Marie Levis, but others could file before the March 16 deadline. Rosiek and Leighton are competing for the position three seat, while Levis and Sundgrenz are running for positions two and six, currently unopposed.

"It's a sad day for public education when somebody who doesn't seem to believe in public education or understand it is now in charge," Levis says of the DeVos appointment.

Rosiek is a professor of education at the University of Oregon. He says his initial motivation to run for the school board was precisely because of the treacherous waters ahead due to the Trump administration.

"After the Nov. 3 election and the things we started seeing at the national level — not just in the field of education but across the board — my sense of obligation to get involved in politics intensified," Rosiek says. "It's not good enough to call my senators. Many of our public institutions are going to be under attack."

Rosiek says he's against DeVos' idea of voucher systems that allow parents to transfer their children to private schools with a stipend from the state. Critics argue that vouchers pit public education against private education, to the advantage of wealthy families.

Rosiek says that, if elected, he'll take a strong stance for better state funding of the 4J school district.

Chronic issues that face the district are similar to those



EVANGELINA SUNDGRENZ



MARY LEIGHTON

PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

confronting other urban school districts in Oregon, such as the ongoing shortage of money from the state government, says school board chair Mary Walston. This means huge class sizes throughout 4J's 19 elementary schools — a 27-to-one student-to-teacher ratio — as well as the district's eight middle schools, four high schools and multiple alternative schools.

Steadily growing enrollment (16,400 and counting) has the board planning to build a new North Eugene High School and new Edison Elementary School by seeking voter approval for a bond in the coming years.

Sundgrenz sits on 4J's budget committee and says she has firsthand knowledge of the budget obstacles facing the area's schools. While Sundgrenz says she is going to "wait and see" when it comes to the long-term effects of DeVos' confirmation, she says one of her concerns as a potential board member is the rise of poverty and homelessness among 4J students.

"I would like to look at ways to deal with chronic underfunding," Sundgrenz says. "There's about 300 homeless families in 4J alone. These are families that need more resources and support."


Leighton, now retired, was previously the executive director of Network Charter School. She still teaches a course called Lane County Economy and Employment at the University of Oregon that connects 4J teachers with local businesses to gain ideas for their classroom lessons.

Leighton says she is interested in helping schools collaborate with community organizations to help enrich student education, but couldn't specify which organizations or which subjects she is interested in. She too agrees with Levis that Secretary DeVos "doesn't know beans about education," but stressed that the failure of Measure 97 this past fall in Oregon was a more urgent matter than national politics.

"I am more worried about the results of the choice of the people of Oregon to not take this last opportunity to fund their own schools," she says.

The May 16 special election will also feature candidates for Bethel School District and other area school districts. Currently 4J and Lane Community College are the only districts that have contested races.

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