

Crowded field vies to reset school board

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Of the Keizertimes

After more than a year of festering political tumult and hurt feelings, it may come as no surprise that the Salem-Keizer School District's board seats are hotly contested. What might be harder to fathom is that there are 11 candidates for four open positions.

Election Day is May 18. While board members represent specific districts, they are elected by all voters in the Salem-Keizer School District. School board directors are non-paid, nonpartisan positions.

An opening for Zone 1 director on the board is the most crowded race. Four candidates tossed their hats into the mix to replace outgoing director Kathy Goss.

Osvaldo Avila, the talent, innovation and equity coordinator for the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, counts graduation rates, a safe return to in-person education and culturally relevant curriculum among his top priorities.

"I'm running for Salem-Keizer School District because my parents instilled in their children the importance of education and helping others, despite the adversity they faced," reads a statement on Avila's website. "Our school board has ignored too many students and families for too long. We need courageous representation on our board. It is time our district acknowledges and helps everyone."

Avila is a first-generation Mexican American whose parents were migrant workers.

Richard Riggs, regional director for the Oregon State University Extension Service, is concerned about the discord among current board members and the community.

"Special interests have polarized board members and made the current school board dysfunctional, such that it no longer puts the interests of our children first. As a

school board member I will seek community input, build consensus among board members and work on long-term plans to deal with the after effects of the pandemic, address high school graduation rates, close achievement gaps and many other issues," reads a statement on his website.

Riggs is a former board member at Chemeketa Community College.

Ross Schwartzendruber, a Salem sheep farmer, expressed discontent with the district's "data-driven decisions"

"These limitations have eroded community trust and led to disarray during School Board meetings," said Schwartzendruber in a Voters' Pamphlet statement.

He advocates for more frontline school staff in addition to teachers, such as nurses, librarians and counselors.

Kari Zohner, a realtor, states on her website that she wants a return to full-time school five days a week safely and with proper safety protocols in place. The district's position as Oregon's second largest should make it a top contender and priority for state support, she wrote.

"Every school should be a palace for students. It shouldn't take a parent fighting for their child to get into a special segment to get the support they need. We should not have to resort to in-district transfers," Zohner states on her website.

Two candidates have filed to replace outgoing director Marty Heyen.

Ashley Carson-Cottingham, a deputy director for the Oregon's Long-Term Care Ombudsman, champions equity for all students after many BIPOC students and their families turned out during the past few years to testify about hostile environments within the district's schools.

"We will need to pay special attention as we emerge from the pandemic and offer additional academic support, for kids who have struggled with online learning," states Carson-Cottingham on her website.

Linda Farrington, a retired nurse, placed

a return to full-week, in-person learning and support of teachers so that they can focus on teaching as her two top priorities.

She takes issue with the current board's lack of transparency and choices recently made to revamp the flow of public testimony.

"Our leaders cannot involve the public just enough to do what they wanted to do from the start. We need leaders who truly listen to our community," Farrington states on her website.

In Zone 5, incumbent Jesse Lippold Peone will have to fend off two challengers for his seat. Lippold Peone made headlines in 2020 for flouting COVID-19 guidelines and bragging about it on social media. More recently, he proposed changing district director elections so that only candidates who reside in specific zones are able to run to represent that zone.

Peone, a real estate broker, said his Native American heritage gives him the experiences that he brings to bear in decision-making for the school board.

"I live my culture, carry those experiences with me every day, and work hard to learn about others so I can truly represent all students," Lippold Peone writes in his Voters' Pamphlet statement.

Karina Guzmán Ortiz, a partner engagement specialist with the Oregon Department of Education, said a safe return to schools, advocacy for vaccination and closing social and racial gaps should be the district's top priorities.

She also takes issue with what some perceive to be the marginalization of voices at Salem-Keizer School Board meetings.

"We have very talented students facing poverty, houselessness, racism, and social and economic disparities. It is time our board acknowledges and listens to us all," Guzmán Ortiz wrote on her website. "I will center the voices that have been historically excluded and work to build a system that serves everyone."

Mike Slagle, a manager for Westpro Labs, advocates for a return to school and extracurricular activities as well as improving transparency and communication at the board level.

Slagle also wants school resource officers to return to Salem-Keizer schools after partnerships with local police departments ended earlier this year.

"They build positive relationships with students and families, they are trained to recognize child abuse and gang activity, and help to ensure students safety," Slagle writes on his website.

In Zone 7, Director Paul Kylo is not seeking re-election. Liam Collins, an acquisition manager for Enterprise Holdings, and Maria Hinojos Pressey, operations director for PCUN, an advocacy group for farmworkers and working Latinx families, are vying to replace him.

Collins, like others, laments the state of the current SKPS board in his Voter's Pamphlet statement.

"Our school board is mired in politics and focused on the wrong priorities," Collins wrote. As a foster parent, Collins states he has seen how school resource officers and online learning have made a difference in the lives of students. "[Students] need more mentoring. We must also let kids attend the school of their choice, to prioritize their learning over their home location."

Hinojos Pressey advocates for a safe return to schools, prioritizing funding for students most in need and equal opportunity that reverberates in the lives of the students and their families. She also places an emphasis on the needs of English Language Learners.

"For too long, these students have been left behind, and too many never finish high school. As a Latinx community advocate, I'll always work to ensure we're making education accessible to all," she wrote on her website.

Caption It!

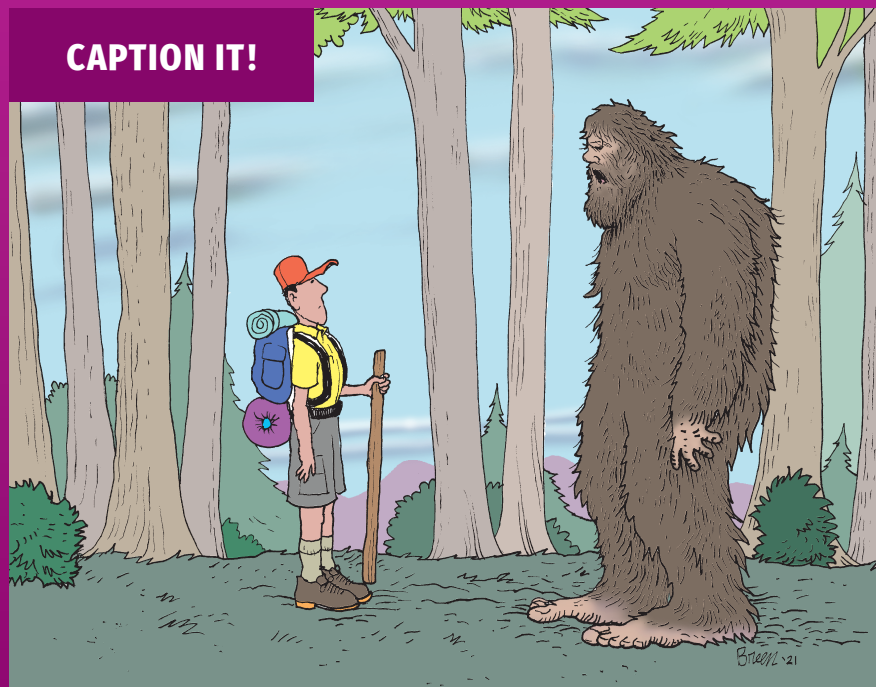
By STEVE BREEN

ARCHIVE
WINNER



"DO THESE GLASSES MAKE MY EYES LOOK FAT?"
— Barry Codron, Fair Oaks, CA

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