



For January 2020

A monthly newsletter covering area schools

South Lane School District board members share hopes for future

BY DAMIEN SHERWOOD
DSHERWOOD@CGSENTINEL.COM

January was School Board Recognition Month in Oregon, during which the Oregon School Boards Association honors the unpaid elected volunteers who serve on Oregon's 197 local school boards, 19 education service district boards and 17 community college boards.

Among the South Lane School Board's responsibilities, the board establishes rules that govern schools in accordance with state and federal laws while authorizing, appropriating and approving the district's budget each year.

The school board also hires the superintendent and is responsible for evaluating the superintendent's performance on an annual basis.

As elected members of the community, the school board's work is done in public and it serves as a communication body between the community and school district with board positions up for election every four years.

The Sentinel asked members of the South Lane School Board to answer some questions, both personal and general, to provide the community a snapshot of the people they've elected and a window into the volunteer work they do.

The following are answers provided by SLSD board members who were available to participate.

1. What inspired you to become a school board member?

Sherry Duerst-Higgins, chair —

I wanted to be involved and engaged in education in my community at the time my three children were attending schools in South Lane. I felt it was important to become a board member to serve my community and the students of South Lane. Our students are our future and our responsibility to educate and support in their efforts to succeed now and in the future. It has been my privilege serve my community and to make the decisions I can for our students' education.

Alan Baas, vice chair —

Most of my career has been in education-related work, from high school teaching to research analyses to career education to university publications and college scholarships. It was a no-brainer that I apply for the school board when I retired — I've seen too much of education not to want to keep supporting it

however I can.

Jerry Settlemeyer —

I believe that kids deserve the very best education we can provide and with my pre-retirement experience I believe I can help "expect and provide" that standard through participation and encouragement as a School Board member.

Tammy Hodgkinson —

I have a sincere belief that government is a participatory activity and if we want government to work, then the best place to start (outside of voting) is at the local level. Plus, as a former kindergarten teacher, I have a passion for the fundamental significance of Preschool/Early Elementary education. It's a perspective that I think is critical to bring to the Board. I also have family members who are disabled. Children (and their families) in the disability community face unique challenges in education. It can be overwhelming and isolating to navigate at times and one of my goals is to be an advocate for them.

Dustin Bengtson —

I've been involved in youth sports as the president of South Valley Athletics for a number of years and was a member of the bond committee. And really it was my involvement in the bond committee that led me to want to figure out a different way to support the school district. In walking through the community and trying to articulate the need for that bond investment, it was interesting to see the wide difference in opinion of how the district was not only performing, but utilizing funds, which were really in conflict with my own. So I thought maybe I could help with that.

2. How important is community engagement and what does that look like?

Sherry Duerst-Higgins, chair —

Extremely important. I am involved in my community through service on several community boards, through my business connections and volunteering in nonprofits. I interact with members of my community on a daily basis. I listen and encourage interaction from my community members. I encourage feedback from parents, students and other community members on their thoughts and ideas in the direction of the school district. I am elected to hear from the community and make decisions that support our school district.

Alan Baas, vice chair —

We are elected by public vote. How can I not consider the community in everything I do as a board member? Particularly in these troubled times where globally, nationally, and locally folks are struggling with pretty big issues. We all have a responsibility to see to it that our children are equipped for the changes that accompany these challenges.

More specifically, one of the characteristics we as a board expressed for applicants for the upcoming permanent superintendent position was an "ability to build and sustain strong, effective community/business partnerships that impact student success." Seems to me such partnering must include active board participation in understanding and building such relationships. Keeping in mind the board's role is at the policy level and often does not touch school operations, I don't want to presume to say what all this is going to look like.

Jerry Settlemeyer —

Very important, although we have not achieved that involvement most likely developed through many years of not being engaged to function that way.

Dustin Bengtson —

That the community has an understanding of the decisions that the district makes. We have to be as transparent as we can on how we utilize public funds and managing the resources of the district. And that involves not only school board, but parents and teachers trying to articulate what we're doing and how we're doing the best we can with what we have available to us. And

I do believe that there's room for improvement in anything we do, but there's an awful lot of good things happening within South Lane School District, so we need to think of ways to involve people more consistently throughout our decision-making process.

A really good example of that recently is the work being done on the Student Success Act funds.

3. Which of the board's current areas of focus are you most interested in working on?

Sherry Duerst-Higgins, chair —

The most important area of involvement in the next few months is the selection and hiring of our next superintendent.

Someone that is highly qualified with visionary leadership skills, experience as an administrator,

excellent communication skills, integrity and to be involved in our community. In a few weeks we will be reviewing and interviewing the candidates.

This will involve the board, staff, parents and community members. It is extremely important to select the most qualified candidate that can lead South Lane School District into the future.

Alan Baas, vice chair —

Anything that wakes us all up to how the town and the gown — the community and the schools — must work together if we are to educate children suited to deal with the future my generation is bestowing on them. More directly, of course, we are doing a great job once again with strong attention to Career Technology Education (CTE) as well as maintaining an excellent Family Resource Center with good services for our many diverse populations.

Jerry Settlemeyer —

I believe the board focus on being more aware of what is actually happening in our schools may lead to more beneficial and actual involvement in bettering the education in our district. Many fantastic things are happening each school day and with clearer understanding of the challenges and needs in our district we will be able to help make even more fantastic happen.

Tammy Hodgkinson —

Equity is a hot issue right now in education, but it's important that "equity" becomes a goal we strive to actually achieve, and not just a buzzword we employ to add a thin veneer of temporary credibility to the District. I find it very encouraging that the Student Success Act will allow

the District to first, identify areas where we need to improve, and then address those deficits in meaningful ways backed by data.

It's also encouraging that the Legislature seems to be quite serious about wanting to be active partners with Oregon's school districts in this process. I have seen a lot of legislative initiatives plow through education.

Inevitably, the results, good or bad, just wind up being tucked away in an obscure file somewhere and that's the end of it. On to the next "new thing." The SSA feels different and I'm excited to see it actually help us reach the kids who need it the most.

Dustin Bengtson —

The most important thing for all of us right now is the selection of the new superintendent. That individual will have a huge influence on the success of the district and what we can provide for kids. I come from a background of facilities and asset management, so I'm very interested in how we use our facilities. The school district has an interesting role in the community in that we own all these resources that the community relies on whether or not you have kids in school.

4. What are you most proud of accomplishing in your position as board member?

Sherry Duerst-Higgins, chair —

Directing and supporting the board passage of a new high school, the building of Harrison, the updating of our aquatic center, selecting a permanent facility and continuing to meet the needs of the high school. That means working with students, parents and the community to be able to provide the best education we are able to with

the dollars and resources available to us.

Alan Baas, vice chair —

Working with six other citizens with clearly different points of view who are also all clearly dedicated to the goal of helping our kids grow up to be the best they can be.

Jerry Settlemeyer —

Encouraging more communication and information sharing.

Tammy Hodgkinson —

One of the things I learned after being elected to the Board is that Board members are expected to set policy, but typically you aren't the people doing the actual work. That said, we can lend our support to the work that others are doing and influence the direction that the district takes.

I am extremely proud of the vibrant network of local agencies, resources, and collaboration that Jackie Lester and Ana Maria Dudley built to support our families and students in the district. Thanks to years of their hard work and dedication, South Lane is a candidate to open a Community Health Center. I like to think that my support for their amazing work helped in some small way to keep it going.

Dustin Bengtson —

I've only been there since July, but I think we are very fortunate to have Yvonne Curtis as our interim superintendent.

I think she's bringing tremendous capacity to the district and will help us understand our needs. So if there's anything I feel I contributed to, it's that piece. I think we should all feel good about having Yvonne as our interim superintendent.

Discover Something New Every Day

When it comes to learning, the newspaper gives you the big picture by bringing your favorite school subjects to life! Find out what's happening in your community and on the other side of the globe. It's all inside your local newspaper. Brad's Cottage Grove Chevrolet is proud Sponsor of Newspapers in Education.

