



Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce
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Spring 2019 Candidate Questionnaire Eau Claire School Board General Election: April 2

What's it about: There are 3 seats on the 7-member Eau Claire School Board, who will be elected to 3-year terms this spring. On April 2, the top 3 vote getters will be elected to those seats.

Election Day: Tuesday, April 2, 2019. Polls are open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Early voting: Weekdays through Friday, March 29. The Elections Office is located through the alleyway behind 203 S. Farwell Street. For those outside the City of Eau Claire, contact your municipal clerk for early voting information.

Who can vote: The election is open to all eligible voters who live in the Eau Claire Area School District.

Where you vote and who is on your ballot:

- Go to myvote.wi.gov Enter your voting address to learn which races are on your ballot and where to vote.

About this questionnaire:

The Good Government Council (GGC) is a committee of the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce dedicated to encouraging voter participation and providing members of the business community with non-biased information about candidates' positions on important issues. Although the Chamber is active in policy issues, it is non-partisan and does not endorse political candidates.

Who is running: Three of the individuals who will be on the ballot on April 2 answered this questionnaire. On the following pages, you will find their answers as provided by them. The candidates are listed in alphabetical order.

Aaron Harder (incumbent)
Tim Nordin
Eric Torres (incumbent)
Erica Zerr

Candidate Questions:

1. What are your background and qualifications for this position, and why are you a candidate?
2. The future of Roosevelt School is a current hot-button issues that's part of a larger questions about school boundaries. What is your approach to the realignment of the school boundaries?
3. The district faces unfunded liabilities of over \$100 million related to Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB), a subject the board has been wrestling with since 2012. Although it was identified last year by the board's budget development committee as financially unsustainable in its current structure, an expected decision in December was postponed. What is the district's path to dealing with this financial issue?
4. Even with added revenue from the recent referendum and prospective additions state funding, the school budget will continue to be a challenge. What are your ideas for managing costs while ensuring the district meets its mission?

Q1. What are your background and qualifications for this position, and why are you a candidate?

Aaron Harder: Did not return answers.

Tim Nordin:

As a former high school science teacher, and a Ph.D. in education policy, my professional life has always focused around my passion for educating students. I have worked with schools across four states and in rural, urban, and suburban settings. That includes bringing service learning projects to the small, rural school in Iowa in which I taught, working with elementary and high school students in New Jersey in FIRST robotics, helping to understand how observation feedback for teacher evaluation could be made more impactful for teachers' practice, and examining ways in which to facilitate equity among Eau Claire schools in terms of high school course offerings by increasing parity in enrollment numbers. I am running to continue to bring my best to improving education, and to give other stakeholders an ear to help address their needs.

Eric Torres (i):

I am a public educator. I served as a teacher and administrator nationally and abroad for almost twenty years before joining UWEC in 2011. I graduated from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru as an Attorney and specialized in Constitutional Law and Political Science at the Constitutional Studies Center of Madrid, Spain. Later on, as I focused on the analysis of education public policy, I earned a Masters of School Administration and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Teaching with a specialization in Cultural Studies from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. I have consulted with the World Bank, U.S. Inter-American Agency for Development, and Ministries of Education of Peru and Chile. As a board member, I plan to work to improve public education in collaboration with all those who have a stake in the success of all the children, including the professional educators who provide leadership every day in our schools.

Erica Zerr:

I have been involved in public education since my daughter entered the public schools in Eau Claire 6 years ago. I started as a representative on the Parent Advisory Council and now serve as the president of our school's Parent Group. In 2015 I received my Montessori Assistant Teacher's Certificate from the Association Montessori International (AMI) in St. Paul, MN. and have been working as an assistant teacher at Saint Edward's Montessori School in Eau Claire ever since. In 2016, I got involved with group of local business owners, educators, parents and community members and helped form Initiative for New Directions in Education (INDE), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization aimed at expanding innovative education opportunities within our region.

In short, I am passionate about the promise and the possibility of public education. I believe our district has tremendous capacity for growth and innovation, even despite its incredible challenges. I am running for School Board because I believe it is time for our district to thrive instead of just barely surviving.

My goals are to prioritize inclusive processes that build bridges between our students and our teachers, our teachers and our administration and the administration and our board. The connection points between these groups have become frayed in recent years and I believe that is the job of our board to prioritize the culture of our district. Additionally, in the current climate, I believe that it is vital that School Board representatives are advocating at the state and local level for a fair funding formula to support our district. We can only fix so much at the local level, and although we face a challenging cycle that is sure to see cuts in many areas of our district budget, we need to use our voice at the state level to advocate for the change we want to see. Lastly, I want to empower teachers as leaders within our district. Our educators and staff are our greatest resource. They are valued members of our community and in many cases, of our family. Teachers and building staff are on the front lines of the work of supporting our children as they grow to be the future leaders of our community and our world. As a district, we need to embrace existing policies to give teachers more control over their classrooms, curriculum and collaborative time. Our teachers need more flexibility in order to reach our kids and as a board, we need to make sure that we foster a system that gives rise to innovative, educator-led ideas.

Q2. The future of Roosevelt School is a current hot-button issues that's part of a larger questions about school boundaries. What is your approach to the realignment of the school boundaries?

Aaron Harder: Did not return answers.

Tim Nordin:

While change can be a difficult process, it is imperative that the district work to ensure that students under its care receive the best possible education. When schools become overcrowded or underutilized, student learning is negatively impacted. This is primarily from obstacles such as using classrooms not intended for instruction, removal of space for specialists to work, of fewer full time support staff on hand at a given time. At these times, drawing new boundary lines can address these issues while remaining fiscally responsible in a district with significant budget challenges. The district has already made some of these adjustments at the high school level, and is now considering similar changes across elementary schools. When boundaries need to be shifted, the goal should be to establish boundaries that can remain steady for 5-10 years, at minimum so as to minimize disruption of student and parent routines.

Eric Torres (i):

I am guided by the principle of equal educational opportunity and I understand that school attendance areas are defined to support the mission and vision of the school district. According to school policy, the school board and superintendent review school attendance areas at least every ten years in alignment with the U.S. Census. The last revision was made last academic year, attending inequity issues. Any changes to attendance areas are made considering availability of space, proximity to school, safety, equity, and neighborhood unity. I believe that, neighborhood areas, particularly at the elementary level, should be retained within a single attendance boundary.

Erica Zerr:

I believe we need to practice immense caution when looking at the issue of school boundaries. Neighborhoods in Eau Claire are very special and unique places with neighborhood schools as the nucleus of a micro-community. When we change a boundary, we impact those micro-communities. We split up friends, we rob children of the school they have prepared to attend or, in some cases, are attending. As a teacher, I see the difficulty of transitions for our students every day. Coming to school, going outside to play, getting ready for lunch and going home can all be incredibly tender times for my 3-6 year-olds. Imagine the transition of having to switch schools, leave your friends and in some cases start over. I have concerns about how boundary changes affect our kids, our families, our staff and our greater communities. More concerning perhaps is the fact that we tend to look at the problem of boundaries in isolation. We look at one issue at a time. We solve one neighborhood's problem or one school's problem at a time rather than looking at our district holistically.

Additionally, I think we need to make timely decisions. There are kids at Roosevelt who have spent nearly an entire school year in limbo, wondering if they will have a school next year. That is not acceptable. If we are going to change boundaries, we need take into account the challenges of our entire community and then we need to make firm decisions in a timely manner.

Q3. The district faces unfunded liabilities of over \$100 million related to Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB), a subject the board has been wrestling with since 2012. Although it was identified last year by the board's budget development committee as financially unsustainable in its current structure, an expected decision in December was postponed. What is the district's path to dealing with this financial issue?

Aaron Harder: Did not return answers.

Tim Nordin:

There is no doubt that the district faces budget challenges that likely must be met by cutting budget items. On top of this, the board's decision to continue to delay tough decisions only leaves teachers feeling up in the air, decreasing their morale and leaving them with painful uncertainty. One factor in my decision to run for the board was to move the board toward

making decisions rather than simply pushing them down the road. Like most problems, the way forward on this issue is to work together. While teachers would benefit most were no change to be made, most recognize that the district's viability requires changes to the system. By partnering with teachers to look at the budget and advise the board on potential areas of trimming, the board can make a decision that will certainly involve pain for the district while knowing that stakeholders' voices have been heard.

Eric Torres (i):

So far, we do not have a clear path to solve this problematic situation in the most equitable and comprehensive way. We have asked faculty and staff to provide input and are waiting to see their ideas. We will consider them very seriously. I believe the problem is structural in nature. We will continue to be in the same situation if the current school funding formula continues to constrain our financial possibilities. It is obvious that the public is very supportive of its school system. That was demonstrated in the last referendum. But even with that proposal, the board knew that it would not solve all the financial issues like, for example, the increasing variation of health care premiums. I am in support of Governor Evers' initiative 'Fair Funding for our Future.' I also think that the school choice program needs to be stopped.

Erica Zerr:

OPEB is a challenging issue and one that I look forward to getting to understand in more detail as a member of the board. At first blush, any decision that includes cuts to OPEB must come with a commitment to a diverse solution to the larger problem of an unsustainable budget. Currently our district trades a lower than average salary for a higher than average benefits package. Despite how high OPEB looks in our district compared to others in our region, they contribute significantly to the overall compensation package for our employees. A significant and sudden drop in those benefits will have a tremendous effect on many of our district educators.

Over the last eight years, it has become increasingly difficult to attract and retain high quality staff in the state of Wisconsin. High quality staff is a strategic priority for our district, and it is something we have to take very seriously if we want to thrive. I have concerns about a decision to make a significant change to OPEB. That said, the fiscal sustainability of our district must be considered. I would support a moderate change to OPEB and plan to augment our district budget in other areas to create a more holistic solution to the greater problem.

I believe the reason for the delay in the December vote on that part of the board had to do with wanting to get teacher input on the issue of OPEB to create consensus for the decision. I am concerned that teacher input wasn't requested sooner as December was slated to be the date for a decision. I believe our board needs to recognize and request teacher voice sooner when discussing issues such as OPEB.

Q4. Even with added revenue from the recent referendum and prospective additions state funding, the school budget will continue to be a challenge. What are your ideas for managing costs while ensuring the district meets its mission?

Aaron Harder: Did not return answers.

Tim Nordin:

As with the OPEB issue, bringing people together is a key to taking Eau Claire to a leadership level in education. The board must engage teachers, community members, and families in working toward finding creative distributions of the budget so that programs can be supported while maintaining fiscal responsibility. By engaging a larger base of knowledge, we can not only find additional creative solutions but increase transparency and community advocacy for supporting our schools in the future. Beyond this, the board must continue to advocate at the state level for changes in the school funding formula that will benefit district students. While the main mission of the board is to ensure the success of the local district, they must also be a voice for improving schools across the state. It is only by looking forward and working together to improve that we will fill our mission.

Eric Torres (i):

Remain focused on strategic plan goals, especially reducing the achievement gap. Expect the effective use of high-quality data that links student achievement to school and classroom practices, centering school improvement efforts around that data with teachers' direct intervention. District must support individual schools' improvement plans, which should include

an equity review, analysis of exclusionary discipline, and access to advance coursework. Monitoring both, outcomes by school as well as spending by school. It would be important to receive reporting of an actual per pupil expenditure, per building.

Erica Zerr:

There is a lot to be hopeful for on the state level when looking at funding for public education. The bi-partisan Blue Ribbon Commission on Funding came up with some very impressive recommendations that would help out districts like Eau Claire tremendously. Many of those recommendations overlap with the budget developed by the Evers administration. The number one thing we can do as representatives of our greater education community is to stand up and advocate for these funding recommendations at the state level. School board members have a responsibility to be the voice of their districts. I have received training from the Wisconsin Public Education Network and Wisconsin Leadership Development in how to advocate to the Joint Finance Committee and I am currently helping organize our community in preparation to share their stories in support of fair funding for our district.

Despite this positive momentum, we still face a difficult budget cycle here in Eau Claire. I look forward to getting more familiar with the intricacies of the budget and the budget process and have tremendous respect for the work of the Budget Development committee. We have difficult choices ahead of us. When money is tight, we simply don't get everything that we want. That's true of personal budgets and district budgets alike. In my house when things get tight, we focus on what we need, not what we want. Our district should do the same. When looking at our district's strategic plan and priorities, I believe that in lean times, our people need to rise to the top. It doesn't matter how fancy the kitchen or lab is if we don't have a happy, talented and high-quality teacher. It doesn't matter how energy efficient the school is when the students aren't being engaged by the curriculum being offered inside the building. Our people matter. The culture of our district matters. And no matter what budget decisions lie ahead, I will always prioritize the culture and community that surrounds our people.