

Candidate Responses for School District 203

Vote for no more than 4

Thomas Andrew Binkowski - no contact email

Charles Cush

- 1. What is your position on current paid leave policies for teachers and teacher assistants in our school district? Do you feel there should be a paid parental leave?**

I think that the current district policy should be evaluated, especially in light of what we have learned from the pandemic. If anything, the pandemic has shown us that we need to be increasingly flexible and ensure that our policies are meeting the broad range of diverse needs of our staff. I do believe that there should be paid parental leave. The staff that are in the classroom with our students are our most valued resource and we need to look at these individuals as front line workers. We need to provide maximum flexibility to ensure that we are retaining our teachers.

- 2. Do you feel District 203 is welcoming and inclusive to students of a variety of ethnic, socio-economic, and gender identities? If not, how do you feel this could be rectified?**

I think the district has made significant strides in becoming a more welcoming place, but I think that we still have work to do. We have had a few incidents over the past few years, that indicate that our community is not as welcoming we might have previously believed. We currently have a Director of Diversity and Inclusion in place, and she has already done some great things, but I think that we need to continue to drive awareness of the underlying challenges that we as a community face on issues of diversity and inclusion. The only real solution is education—Sounds cliché I know, but the only way to really evolve the district and, more importantly, the broader community into an inclusive and welcoming environment is to continue to drive awareness of the issues, and to ensure that our schools are a safe haven and a place not just for academic achievement, but for social-emotional learning as well, to ensure that our students are equipped to be successful in a variety of environments beyond Naperville.

- 3. Do you feel the District is providing equitable educational opportunities for all learners regardless of socio-economic or ethnic background, learning needs or advanced achievement or has there been evidence of opportunity hoarding? Do you feel the school district is adequately addressing the digital divide?**

I think one of the biggest challenges we need to tackle will be closing the achievement gap. As a district, we do well on all key metrics when you look at the average test scores and other performance indicators. A deeper look at the data, however, exposes some challenges in the performance of certain subgroups within the student population. I think this is a leading indicator of our effectiveness as a district, and that it warrants our attention. It is important because as the community becomes more ethnically and economically diverse, our overall scores as a district will begin to be impacted by the

underperforming groups if we are unable to improve the scores in these sub-groups. We have made some strides in this area, but the pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact that we have yet to have the ability to measure. One way that I have and will continue to work to solve this issue is by bringing attention to it and challenging our administration to find ways to address it. Another way is to work within the community to drive increased involvement among the parents and families across all sub-segments of the population. Our schools operate best when we have involved parents across the board. Collaboration between school and home is a critical factor in determining student success. The more consistency we can drive between what our kids are learning in the classroom and having reinforced at home, the better. Early childhood education, social emotional learning, and more support for home and school associations and programs like watchdogs and other efforts that get parents engaged is going to become increasingly important, and I am committed to lending my support to help to build these efforts

*I think that as important as it is to address the achievement gap, it is important to continue to push the envelope on our advanced achievement students as well. We need to continue to grow **ALL** students and provide opportunities for kids to achieve their full potential, no matter what that potential looks like. The limit should only be the potential, not our ability to develop that potential.*

In terms of the digital divide, I think that the district was ahead of the curve on this one by providing digital devices on a 1 to 1 basis. Despite the challenges we all faced with remote learning, I believe that in the long run, district 203 is actually modeling what will be required of students in the “new” post pandemic world. I see and hearing that many work places will be making permanent changes, no longer requiring a 5 day in-person work week. Many businesses are opting for hybrid or all remote models as a way to save infrastructure costs. We need to prepare our students for this as workplaces will increasingly require employees to be “self-directed” . Fortunately, this is already in the district mission statement, and we are well positioned to equipping our students to manage this new norm.

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William Bernard Egan, III - no contact email when survey was sent

Kristen Fitzgerald

- 1. What is your position on current paid leave policies for teachers and teacher assistants in our school district? Do you feel there should be paid parental leave?**

I support current leave policies for employees in our school district. Teachers who have taught for four years in our school district may take unpaid parental leave consisting of the balance of the school term in which it begins and one additional school term. During this leave, employees may apply accumulated paid sick leave when they are incapacitated due to pregnancy, childbirth or recovery. Other employees may take leave consistent with the Family Medical Leave Act, request a one-year unpaid leave or take

accumulated paid sick time during the period of disability due to pregnancy if a leave is not desired. A survey of surrounding benchmark districts shows similar policies. Though some states have mandated paid parental leave, in Illinois benefits such as parental leave and health care are collectively bargained by employees and school districts. As a Board of Education Member, I will continue to listen to the priorities of our employees and work to balance these priorities within the constraints of our budget.

2. Do you feel District 203 is welcoming and inclusive to students of a variety of ethnic, socio-economic and gender identities? If not, how do you feel this could be rectified?

In the fall of 2019, racist events at Buffalo Wild Wings and Naperville Central showed the dramatic need for progress to overcome racism in our schools and community. Following these incidents, District 203 convened public forums on racism so that students, families and community members could share their experiences. These honest community forums showed the need not just for progress, but for transformation of our school cultures. The District 203 Board and our entire school district are committed to this necessary transformation.

In June of 2020, the Board passed a Resolution reaffirming our commitment to equity for all students, overcoming systemic racism and ending racial injustice. This Resolution pledged our commitment to programmatic funding to achieve equitable student outcomes; systemic review of policies, practices, programs, curricula and culture to undo inequities and achieve a district culture that is inclusive, celebrates diversity and truly achieves equity for all students; elevation of student voices to effect positive systemic change in our schools, community and nation; partnership with and deliberate engagement and inclusion of all families; recognition of the deep value of a diverse staff and administration, and the continued effort to recruit and retain a diverse staff; and acknowledgement of ourselves as leaders in the effort to transform our schools and communities and speak out against acts of racial and social injustice. Our Resolution was lauded by our State Superintendent of Schools for our commitments as well as our honesty in acknowledging all there is to be done.

To accomplish the promises contained in the Resolution, District 203 developed a Comprehensive Equity Plan detailing our goals along with measurable ways we will hold ourselves accountable. The first goal of the Comprehensive Equity Plan is to “create a climate and culture that ensures all people consistently feel valued, respected, included, safe and contributing members to all school environments.”

The Equity plan sets out specific expectations for students and staff to ensure that our collective responsibilities are clearly defined. District 203 is providing specific staff training on implicit bias and equity. In addition, we have addressed our policies to ensure that our expectations for respectful and inclusive student behavior are clear. We are developing annual equity training for students and are committed to empowering diverse student voices as a part of continued work in this area. We are also offering

opportunities for parents, families and community members to engage in conversations on equity and inclusion.

To measure our progress in reaching our climate and culture goal, both students and families will be surveyed as to their positive connection to the school community. Our goal is that 80 percent of students and families in non-dominant identity groups will report a meaningful and positive connection to the school community.

I believe relationships are an essential aspect of family and student connectedness. I have volunteered extensively with organizations like SUCCESS, founded by our district families to empower and ensure the success of our African American students and other students of color. For my work with SUCCESS and advocacy for students, I was recognized by the Illinois State Board of Education with its Award of Excellence for Outstanding Contributions to Illinois Education in 2018. Far greater than any award, the relationships I have built as a part of this work with parents and students have enriched my life, profoundly influenced my understanding of the experiences of families and students in our district and will continue to inspire my work on the Board of Education.

I am committed to ensuring that District 203 welcomes, values, includes, celebrates and respects all students and families. Though we have progress to make, we are taking the steps necessary to achieve this goal.

3. Do you feel the District is providing equitable educational opportunities for all learners regardless of socio-economic or ethnic background, learning needs or advanced achievement or has there been evidence of opportunity hoarding? Do you feel the school district is adequately addressing the digital divide?

When I ran for the Board of Education in 2013, one of my top goals was to make progress in closing the academic achievement gap to ensure that all students are successful in our schools. In the past, student achievement in District 203 has not been equitable. While District 203 has long produced outstanding student results, there are large gaps in academic achievement for students of color, students with special needs and students with fewer economic resources. As Illinois transitioned into more rigorous assessments in 2013, these significant gaps were revealed, showing a need to address students' inequitable success. Though serious efforts were made to close these gaps, we did not see measurable progress until the Board/District enacted a \$2 million annual initiative to close achievement gaps dedicated to the students in schools that had shown the greatest need for academic growth. The impact of this investment cannot be overstated. It was one of the first efforts of our school district to look at resources equitably instead of equally, dedicating our resources toward our commitment to ensuring that all students are successful in our schools. I know of no other school district who acted as decisively or significantly in this way.

The results of this initiative are promising. Students at elementary schools who received these resources are showing enormous progress, particularly in reading. As an example, since 2016 English Language Arts (ELA) scores for African American students at Mill

Street Elementary have gone from 16% to 60%. This work to close achievement gaps has improved the quality of instruction which has increased the scores of all students at the school. District wide however, elementary ELA scores for African American students are in the 40 percent range. Our critical work to close achievement gaps must continue to keep making progress.

Early childhood education is critical to students' future success. Knowing this, we have increased the students served by our early childhood program, including students age birth to age three. To improve kindergarten readiness for all in our community, District 203 also founded an Early Childhood Collaborative to work with private preschool providers and community organizations to offer professional training for staff. The Collaborative also ensures all students are screened early to discover developmental delays and offers engagement programming for parents.

Another area of focus has been summer school. National studies have documented the phenomenon of the "summer slide," where wealthier students have access to more enrichment activities over the summer to increase or maintain their academic standing while students who are economically disadvantaged lose ground over the summer. Previously, the prime participants in our summer school had been students working to exceed academic standards. While summer school is still an important resource for these students, we have worked to reduce barriers to ensure that students who are below standards are also able to participate. In my time on the Board of Education, we have established transportation services as well as partnerships with the YMCA, Champions and the Alive Center to offer wrap-around childcare so that students with working parents can take advantage of all that summer school has to offer. Summer school tuition is free for all students who are economically disadvantaged, and our teachers and counselors work to recruit our students and families so that they are more likely to attend.

In 2015, the Board voted to approve the Digital Learning Initiative, committing to providing a digital device to each District 203 student in grades 3-12. While at the time, our Board could not have anticipated the challenges of remote learning due to the pandemic, this early effort to embrace digital learning set our school district up for success during the current virtual learning environment. At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, we purchased devices for students in grades K-2, ensuring that each student in District 203 has access to the digital tools they need to thrive in the remote learning environment. Local service providers provide discounted internet connectivity for students and families who are economically disadvantaged, and the school district also provides some families with internet hot spots to allow for internet connectivity at home. During remote learning, parents' digital skills and time availability to assist their students has varied. District 203 has worked to assist parents in supporting their students, bringing students with special needs and other students who are struggling into school for additional in person assistance. We will continue to utilize this strategy to help all students attain standards.

As a district, we are also preparing for inequities in learning from the pandemic. I am grateful for the district's work to set up mechanisms to address and immediately remedy potential disparities in outcomes for students resulting from the pandemic. These efforts are making a meaningful difference to address learning needs as they occur. We are also developing summer programming and additional programming for next year to mitigate academic and social and emotional losses resulting from the pandemic. This support will help to remedy the impact the pandemic is expected to have on students' academic and social and emotional progress.

The accelerated growth of our students with achievement gaps is one of the leading factors in our district attaining the highest number of exemplary schools for a unit district in our state. This achievement represents the tireless efforts of our educators along with our district and Board of Education's commitment to provide the resources necessary to support students. This essential work is changing the trajectory of success for students. I'm so proud of the work we are doing to overcome the challenges our students face and that we are leading the way for other school districts. I believe our work to close achievement gaps and help all students succeed must continue to be one of our top priorities. I am committed to ensuring that all District 203 students fully achieve our District Mission.

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Christie Helm - no contact email

Amanda McMillen

- 1. What is your position on current paid leave policies for teachers and teacher assistants in our school district? Do you feel there should be a paid parental leave?**

Considering the summer, winter, and spring break schedule afforded to most teachers, I feel that offering teachers 15 sick days annually with an ability to accumulate up to 260 days and 2 personal days which can accumulate as sick days when unused, is enough time to support the needs of teachers and their families. In reviewing the FMLA policy, however, I feel there is a lack of clarity if the extension of benefits will be afforded to the supportive partner after the birth, adoption, or foster placement of a child. In this respect, I believe a separate parental leave policy would be beneficial for the district to incorporate.

Teachers and staff should be afforded the opportunity to raise and nurture their own families, especially in the child's first year, when the forms of attachment are so critical. Additionally, FMLA only qualifies for teachers that have been employed for a combined 12-month period, which for a teacher in this situation, would only have accumulated 15 days paid time off, which could cause financial strain for the family. Offering paid parental leave would demonstrate the investment and support of the faculty and staff hired by our district. Even for teachers/staff that have accumulated enough sick time to be paid during their entire parental leave, this may not be enough to support the

teacher/staff if they need to take off additional days to care for a sick child during that first year. Even offering a couple of weeks of paid parental leave could be a huge benefit for the teacher/staff.

2. Do you feel District 203 is welcoming and inclusive to students of a variety of ethnic, socio-economic, and gender identities? If not, how do you feel this could be rectified?

In the past couple of years, I have seen the district make some intentional strides to address diversity, equity, and inclusion. There is a Diversity Committee of the Board, they hired an Executive Director of Diversity and Inclusion, this fall the Board incorporated a Diversity and Inclusion Policy within its bylaws, many teachers and staff received implicit bias training, and recently most schools in the district incorporated at least one goal around diversity and inclusion in their school improvement plans. Despite these areas of progress, I feel there is much work that needs to be done to continue to provide oversight and implementation of these initiatives.

Representation matters. In my personal experience within the school district, I have had several interactions that demonstrated that our district still has a long way to go to be truly inclusive. For example, when I look at the leadership of the administration and the faculty and staff at my kids' school, the lack of diversity is glaring. I have had conversations with the school administration about the difference between gender identity and gender expression and was met with confused looks about the use of these terms. When I volunteered to read a book in my sons' classrooms and introduced books that had black children as the lead characters, teachers seemed excited by the introduction of more representative materials of the children in their classroom. And when my daughter finally learned about American history, she was offered a "choose your own adventure" book about slavery, as if slaves had any choice in their fate. I was very concerned by this white-washed representation of our history, and the presentation of the Confederate flag, which is currently used as a terrorist symbol, within the classroom during this lesson.

I believe the priorities outlined in the new Diversity and Inclusion policy is sufficient including 1) professional development for administrators and staff, 2) curriculum improvements of cultural literacy, and 3) updating hiring practices to recruit and retain culturally rich staff. However, I would like to see some benchmarks outlined for the entire district and not just at a school level. Additionally, I think we need to look at disciplinary practices to ensure that youth of color or non-gender conforming youth are not disproportionately impacted by discipline procedures within the district.

3. Do you feel the District is providing equitable educational opportunities for all learners regardless of socio-economic or ethnic background, learning needs or advanced achievement or has there been evidence of opportunity hoarding? Do you feel the school district is adequately addressing the digital divide?

I believe that talent, intellect, drive, and resilience does not discriminate; however, the ability to access opportunities and to foster that potential has not historically been

equitable. The fact that Naperville District 203 continues to demonstrate an academic achievement gap that is greater than or similar to the state average, indicates that there may be disparities in educational achievement opportunities. I do not have enough background to provide specific examples of hoarding opportunities, except for personal testimony provided by students of 203 during a town hall meeting on June 23, 2020. During this conversation, students, and parents of color shared microaggressions they experienced within 203 that included teachers being surprised that their children would qualify or be interested in advanced achievement opportunities. As mentioned above, we should have some specific data around the demographics of students accessing these opportunities as a place to start diving in and understanding where the disconnect is occurring so we can be thoughtful about addressing the systemic barriers within our district.

Regarding the digital divide, I believe that 203 is well-positioned to provide the technological resources and supports for all students and has been proactive during COVID19 with not only providing Chromebooks but also hotspots for students with internet issues. Without the data around the number and demographics of students that have engaged and been active with their digital resources during this past year, it is difficult to clearly identify if a digital divide is present within the district.

Robert M Reed - no contact email

Adam Russo - no contact email

Donna Wandke

- 1. What is your position on current paid leave policies for teachers and teacher assistants in our school district? Do you feel there should be a paid parental leave?**

In the last Illinois General Assembly a bill was introduced, HB5168, that would provide four weeks of paid family leave after working for an employer for at least one year. The bill did not move out of committee, but I thought this would be an interesting place to start as a target to address your question on paid parental leave. The reason the bill was introduced is that in Illinois, many private corporations do not provide paid family leave.

Although Naperville District 203 also does not have paid family leave, employees are granted fifteen days of sick leave each year and can accumulate them over years. From my experience as a teacher in the district, I used my accumulated sick days to take what was equivalent to a paid parental leave for the ten weeks after my first son was born. I believe the ability to accumulate unused sick days is more effective as an employee can use them for parental leave or medical leave. This system allows for teachers to take paid leave if it is needed but also provides flexibility to save these days instead of losing them as is the case in many companies.

- 2. Do you feel District 203 is welcoming and inclusive to students of a variety of ethnic, socio-economic, and gender identities? If not, how do you feel this could be rectified?**

As a board member, I strongly supported the hiring of our Director of Equity and Inclusion. This director has worked closely with experts, our community and a committee to develop a Comprehensive Equity Plan with goals extending from now until the year 2023. Although many of these goals are academic in nature and will be discussed in the following question, the goals are far reaching and speak to the climate and culture of our buildings as well as the academics. Two of the indicators of success focus on students and families having “a meaningful and positive connection in their school as evidenced by survey data and focus group participation and feedback.” The environment our students are in each day has a profound impact on their learning. The district has a goal and plan to make this environment welcoming and inclusive to all students. The commitment of financial resources toward these goals indicates the support from the Board of Education for our district to make progress in this area. Increasing the diversity of staff and teachers that work so closely with our students aligns with a goal the Board of Education has set for our superintendent. The goal is to continue “efforts to attract, select, and retain a highly qualified and diverse workforce.” Professional development for all our staff has been focusing on understanding implicit bias and cultural awareness as they interact with our diverse population of students.

The Comprehensive Equity Plan along with our nationally recognized social-emotional learning program will set the ground work for each school to develop a connected goal on their school improvement plan. Our schools have already begun to address this through academic goals to close achievement gaps, including some schools focusing on gaps for girls in mathematics. This is something that I am passionate about as a former high school mathematics teacher.

- 3. Do you feel the District is providing equitable educational opportunities for all learners regardless of socio-economic or ethnic background, learning needs or advanced achievement or has there been evidence of opportunity hoarding? Do you feel the school district is adequately addressing the digital divide?**

A goal that the Board of Education has set for the superintendent is “to close achievement gaps and maximize growth opportunities for all students.” This goal has been supported by the Board of Education with a \$2 million dollar annual investment. Our Comprehensive Equity Plan takes this a step further and highlights as an indicator of success that our district will have “at least a nine percent reduction in academic gaps for the following student groups: Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, special education, English learners, and economically disadvantaged.” In addition, our multi-tiered system of support framework will respond to both the academic and social-emotional needs of all students. As you can see there are many opportunities of growth for the district and I am excited to continue to support these efforts.

Another effort that I have fully supported is our Digital Learning Initiative. This was an effort to place chrome books and iPads in the hands of every student and to work with

internet providers to ensure that all students have access to the internet. Along with placing these devices in their hands comes the training for each student to learn how to use the device and be digitally responsible. It is due to these efforts that our district was able to pivot so quickly and provide digital learning to our students at the beginning of the pandemic. By providing these tools to all students it effectively minimizes the digital divide and begins to set all students on a level playing field.

The Board of Education is committed to equality for all students in other areas addressed by the Comprehensive Equity Plan, for example the plan includes measurable goals to improve diversity in advanced classes. As you can see the district is actively committed to making a difference toward equity for all students.

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