



**AAUW Naperville Area
Candidate Questionnaire**

**Consolidated Election
April 4, 2023**

**Naperville Community Unit School District 203
Board of Education Candidates
(alphabetical order)
Vote for 3**

1. [Ronald Amato](#)
2. [Melissa Kelley Black](#)
3. [Kristine Gericke](#)
4. [Joseph Kozminski](#)
5. [Gilbert R. Wagner](#)

Methodology

We emailed all candidates and invited them to answer questions relevant to AAUW public policy priorities and the position the candidates are seeking. We sent follow-up reminders and collated all the responses. Candidates' responses have not been edited. Candidates who did not respond are indicated as "No response received."

Ronald Amato

Website: <https://amatofor203.wordpress.com/>

Social Media: Facebook – [Amato for 203](#)

1. Are you satisfied with the district's implementation of the Keeping Youth Safe and Healthy Act and the district's general sex education and health education? Please describe the program strengths or needed improvements.

Yes. In general, I am satisfied with the District's approach using the wellness model and am glad that the District was able to opt out of the National Sex Education Standards and maintain local control. I am concerned about Illinois HB 5188, as I believe that it will place unfunded mandates on school districts that will be difficult to achieve (in sum, I support the IASB's position on HB 5188).

2. What is your position on the renewal of the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program? Do you favor state tax credits or vouchers for use by families to send children to private schools? If so, how do you feel this affects public schools?

I am not in favor of state tax credits or vouchers in District 203. My focus is on maintaining and improving, where possible, our public schools. In some geographic areas, I can understand why parents would feel that school vouchers and the like make sense.

3. Do you believe the current paid leave policy for employees in your district is appropriate? What, if any, changes would you implement in the number of weeks of paid leave and the purposes for which it could be used?

I believe that the District needs to follow the law and honor what is contained in the current agreements between the District and the NUAE and other unions. If this item is up for discussion/negotiation in the future, I will closely review the issue and formulate my opinion at that time.

4. What, if any, is the role of the board in the selection of materials for school libraries and curriculum development?

Day-to-day management of schools and facilities should be handled by administrators and staff, for the most part. However, as elected officials, the board has a responsibility to work closely with administrators and educators, as we represent parents and taxpayers. Accordingly, board members must be willing to exercise independent judgment in this area and be willing to voice their concerns.

5. What actions would you recommend to encourage the inclusion of female students and underrepresented groups in the most challenging STEM classes?

I think that administrators and educators should focus on students who express an interest or proficiency in this area and find ways to encourage them to become more involved. For example, I recall hearing about a student club called Girls Who Code, and I believe that clubs and organizations like that can make studying challenging curriculum seem more appealing. Educators should also try to encourage participation in entry level courses, so that students who express an interest have an opportunity to participate and grow, and can ultimately take on more challenging material.

Melissa Kelley Black

1. Are you satisfied with the district's implementation of the Keeping Youth Safe and Healthy Act and the district's general sex education and health education? Please describe the program strengths or needed improvements.

It is difficult to answer this question since there is very little information available regarding Naperville 203's sex and health curriculum.

I know as a parent, I started using anatomically correct terminology when my children started potty training. I also taught my children when they were young that nobody should touch their private parts. My children were encouraged to feel comfortable discussing their bodies and seeking out trusted adults to address concerns or questions. I did not want my kids to learn about sex from their uninformed friends or online. I approached the topic as I would any other body system. My goal was for my children to be equipped with the necessary tools and information to lead healthy and safe lives at all ages.

2. What is your position on the renewal of the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program? Do you favor state tax credits or vouchers for use by families to send children to private schools? If so, how do you feel this affects public schools?

I have concerns with the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program's ability to provide more educational choices to all families.

The program is intended to give more educational choices to families especially low income households. However, the program does not cover the entire tuition so families still have to pay the remaining cost of tuition plus expenses associated with books,

uniforms, and transportation. These additional costs reduce the ability of many families to participate in this program.

It is also not uncommon to see tuition increases at private and for profit schools. This presents the issue of the families having to pay more money to keep their children enrolled in private school which compounds already existing equity issues between different socio-economic groups.

Even if a family had the money, private schools can choose to admit only the best and brightest students, further reducing the ability of many families to benefit from the program.

Students with special needs, disabilities, or those for whom English is not their first language will not gain more choices as a result of education tax credits. Few private schools provide remedial programs or special education services.

The public school system will remain the only viable choice for many families.

While tax credit scholarships don't expressly use public funds as tuition, any program that draws students away from public schools will lead to fewer dollars spent towards public schools. Illinois generally funds schools on a per-pupil basis, so fewer students equals less funding.

Reduced funding can negatively impact educational improvements within public schools that result in better outcomes for children such as smaller classes, summer school, and hiring as well as retaining qualified teachers.

The argument that students will perform better in subsidized private schools has not been reflected in recent studies. Some students performed significantly worse when switching to private schools. More school choices do not always translate to better outcomes for the students.

3. Do you believe the current paid leave policy for employees in your district is appropriate? What, if any, changes would you implement in the number of weeks of paid leave and the purposes for which it could be used?

Recent changes to state law have addressed previous concerns voiced by employees regarding the paid leave policy.

Naperville 203 needs to continue to take measures to ensure that we attract and retain high quality employees.

Like many people in our community, I decided to move to Naperville 203 so my children could have a high quality education, more opportunities to grow, and a brighter future.

Even residents without children within the school district realize that the value of our homes and the desirability of our community relies upon having a school district that produces well-educated individuals. Our community prides itself on being one of the best cities in America to raise a family.

The quality of our school district depends heavily on the professionals that work with the students. If our school district wants to hire and retain the best educators and staff, we need to make sure that we are making decisions that make our school district an attractive place to work.

4. What, if any, is the role of the board in the selection of materials for school libraries and curriculum development?

As the [Illinois Association of School Boards](#) notes, the difference between a school board and the administration is that a school board *governs* while administration *manages*. Governing means offering strategic direction; managing means using that direction to create and implement action.

In other words, the school board does not manage the day-to-day operations of the schools. There are policies already in place and knowledgeable professionals in the school system that select the materials for school libraries and curriculum development. The administration is expected to lead the ongoing curriculum development and review process. Curriculum materials need to align with state educational standards.

The school board is responsible for ensuring that materials align with district goals and students' needs.

5. What actions would you recommend to encourage the inclusion of female students and underrepresented groups in the most challenging STEM classes?

As a woman with a master's degree in science education and former middle school science teacher, I appreciate the inclusion of this question.

Studies show that students benefit from being exposed from a young age to relatable STEM role models who can show students what they can also achieve. Classroom education needs to be equitable and inclusive to avoid biases that prevent many students from viewing themselves as capable and able to pursue STEM careers. Diverse STEM role models and a variety of STEM careers can be presented in

classroom lessons, books, posters in the classroom, guest speakers, or older students with similar interests. Students can be surveyed to find out what STEM topics interest them so teachers can tie STEM skills to topics that are interesting to their students. This increases the likelihood of students being motivated to learn and participate in STEM activities.

Educators need to reinforce a growth mindset to learning instead of allowing students to believe that abilities and skills are inherent. STEM skills can be developed and improved with practice. Science curriculum should be hands on and not focused on rote learning. Activities should challenge students to use innovative and creative problem solving strategies. The scientific process includes mistakes and failures. Students should be encouraged to use their failures to learn and grow.

STEM education can take place inside and outside of the classroom. Students can participate in real life applications of STEM in their community or problem solve issues directly affecting their lives. Some schools offered STEM take home kits so students are challenged to problem solve themselves at home or with their families. Schools can offer STEM-oriented clubs at all grade levels. Summer programs can be utilized by school districts to promote and enhance STEM learning. Schools can provide students and families with STEM resources available in the community, through colleges, and online.

If we want innovative, problem solving citizens, we need to invest resources into teaching STEM education to all of our students especially females and students in underrepresented groups.

Kristine Gericke

Social Media: Twitter: @gericke4D203

1. Are you satisfied with the district's implementation of the Keeping Youth Safe and Healthy Act and the district's general sex education and health education? Please describe the program strengths or needed improvements.

I am satisfied with the district's implementation of age appropriate, comprehensive health education covering a variety of topics related to personal health and safety. We continually work with ISBE to align to new standards.

2. What is your position on the renewal of the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program? Do you favor state tax credits or vouchers for use by families to send children to private schools? If so, how do you feel this affects public schools?

I do not support programs that divert money from public schools.

3. Do you believe the current paid leave policy for employees in your district is appropriate? What, if any, changes would you implement in the number of weeks of paid leave and the purposes for which it could be used?

I think our paid leave is fair. The changes I would like to see need to be advocated for at the state and federal level. As a broader society we need to allow for more paid leave for new parents and for family members to help care for each other in times of need.

4. What, if any, is the role of the board in the selection of materials for school libraries and curriculum development?

Annually, the superintendent presents a list and description of textbooks and instructional materials to the board for consideration and approval.

5. What actions would you recommend to encourage the inclusion of female students and underrepresented groups in the most challenging STEM classes?

We must keep encouraging girls and underrepresented groups to try new classes. We also need to continue developing outside partnerships to help foster curiosity in STEM fields. Mentorships and job shadowing with professionals are meaningful ways to expose students to an array of careers.

Joseph Kozminski

Website: <https://koz203.com>

Social Media: <https://www.facebook.com/VoteKozminski203>

1. Are you satisfied with the district's implementation of the Keeping Youth Safe and Healthy Act and the district's general sex education and health education? Please describe the program strengths or needed improvements.

Overall, I am satisfied with the District's sex education and health education program. The District has curriculum experts who ensure the health and sex education curriculum is in compliance with the state's requirements and is grade-level appropriate. In general,

I think it is important for schools to provide factual and medically accurate health and sex education that benefits all students and provides the information they need to make informed decisions and reduce risky behaviors.

2. What is your position on the renewal of the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program? Do you favor state tax credits or vouchers for use by families to send children to private schools? If so, how do you feel this affects public Schools?

While I support a family's right to send their children to a private school, I do not support voucher and tax credit programs for K-12 education. I agree with UNESCO that "education is a basic human right." The public school system must play an essential role in ensuring all kids have access to a quality education. Voucher and tax credit programs, which are inequitable and have been shown to not improve student outcomes in several states, shift money away from public education. Due to the way state funding for public education is allocated in Illinois, the under-funded schools that need state funding most are the ones most negatively impacted by voucher and credit programs while District 203, which only gets about 8% of its revenue from the state and 88% from local sources, is largely unaffected. I have similar concerns about the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program specifically. Unlike a deduction to a charity, which adjusts the filer's income before the tax owed is calculated, this program subtracts 75% of the contribution directly from taxes owed and allows families to take up to \$1 million in tax credits per year. This, like other voucher and tax credit programs for private schools, takes money away from public education.

3. Do you believe the current paid leave policy for employees in your district is appropriate? What, if any, changes would you implement in the number of weeks of paid leave and the purposes for which it could be used?

It is important that employees have the ability to take paid leave when they need time off for illness or family reasons. Leave policies in the District are bargained by each of the four unions during contract negotiations. Although the School Board needs to approve contracts once an agreement between the District and union is reached, the Board does not take part in the contract negotiations themselves. While there are some differences in leave policies between contracts, District employees do get paid leave, including an ample number of days of leave each year (e.g. 15 days of paid sick leave and 2 days of personal leave) with the ability to accrue unused leave for use in later years.

4. What, if any, is the role of the board in the selection of materials for school libraries and curriculum development?

While the Board does approve new curriculum materials each year, the Board does not play an operational role in selecting curricular or library materials or developing

curriculum. There are curriculum experts within the District who select appropriate materials for the curriculum and libraries. I am pleased with the District's commitment to providing a diverse range of age-appropriate materials, especially in the libraries, that gives students the opportunity to be challenged, see different points of view, think critically about complex issues, and explore and process their own experiences.

5. What actions would you recommend to encourage the inclusion of female students and underrepresented groups in the most challenging STEM classes?

I have a personal interest in this topic as a physics educator who has been working throughout my career to bring more female students and students from underrepresented groups into the field. My undergraduate research advisor started involving me in outreach when I was in college, and I have continued to engage in outreach to K-12 students and to get my own students involved in outreach as well. Engaging students early in STEM activities, cultivating their curiosity, and providing positive reinforcement are very important in helping them begin to build their STEM identity and confidence. It is important for students to have the mindset that they can do well in math and science and be successful in a STEM career. The District has a range of opportunities for students to engage in STEM activities both in school and after school, including a partnership with the Naperville Education Foundation (NEF) that has brought robotics through FIRST Lego League to all elementary and middle schools in the District. Encouraging female students and students from underrepresented groups to engage in these activities can help their STEM persistence.

However, there are a couple of other challenges that need to be addressed in addition to providing engagement and encouragement. First, there are persistent stereotypes and biases about who can be successful in STEM that need to be addressed. One way to do this is through professional development that increases awareness of these issues and that provides effective strategies for combatting these stereotypes and biases and for providing support and encouragement for their students. Professional development on student-centered learning or active learning in STEM can also help. While these approaches to instruction are effective practices in general, this method of engagement in the classroom has been shown to be especially beneficial for female students and students in underrepresented groups. Female students and students from underrepresented groups should be encouraged to pursue challenging math and science classes and enrichment throughout their schooling and develop a mindset that they can succeed in these courses.

Another issue is a lack of role models. That is, female students and students from underrepresented groups often do not see themselves when they think of a scientist because they do not see examples of scientists or STEM professionals who are like them. The District's Comprehensive Equity Plan includes an initiative to hire and retain a

more diverse workforce, and doing this in STEM areas would be beneficial. Moreover, connecting students with female scientists and scientists from underrepresented groups at career fairs, through guest lectures or outreach activities, or through mentoring programs would be a way for students from these groups to see that STEM is a viable career path for them. However, even providing examples of contributions in STEM by female scientists and scientists from underrepresented groups in STEM classes has been shown to make a difference in these students' STEM identity and sense of belonging in the STEM.

Gilbert R. Wagner

No response received.