

Spotlight on the Board

NWSC PTA District 15 Candidate Forum

March 17, 2011

There are six candidates running for three 4-year positions on the Community Consolidated School District 15 school board. The election is Tuesday, April 5, 2011. The candidates are: Manjula Sriram, James Ekeberg, Scott Herr, Gerald Chapman, Gerard Iannuzzelli, David Seiffert

Approximately 50 to 60 people attended the Northwest Suburban Council PTA sponsored candidate forum on Thursday, March 17 which was held in the gym of Walter Sundling Junior High, Palatine.

Listed below are verbatim questions and candidate answers given that night. The forum was videotaped and is expected to be shown on local cable access stations as well as uploaded onto the NWSC PTA website at www.nwscpta.org (not yet available as of 10 p.m., 3/21/11).

Q2: What changes do you believe are necessary to strengthen the district curriculum or do you see the current curriculum as satisfactory?

Herr – There are two key things that immediately jump to mind. The first is that junior high students as they move to high school – approximately 20 to 25% of them require some kind of mandatory remedial or refresher training in math or reading before they enter high school. That is a problem as we clearly need to look at those very closely to see what we can do to improve that. The second thing is that the current Illinois standards for education are not very stringent. Illinois has decided to implement the Common Core which is a multiple state new curriculum that is generally thought to be better than the current Illinois standards. But that will take a number of years. So we need to do that but we also need to make other changes to improve the curriculum in the future.

Ekeberg – I think if you look at the statistics what you will see is that students that we have from kindergarten through 8th grade score extremely well on those tests as they move to high school and do extremely well in high school. It's the children that we get at various levels throughout their years in the district that we are struggling to meet the needs of and we are working on programs so we can bring them up to the same level of students that we get for all 9 years.

Seiffert – Couple of things, right now we are involved in a huge effort going on within the district – Navigate15. Sees quite a few people in the crowd that attended the curriculum night. There are going to be recommendations from the public themselves of what the district should be looking at and superintendent Thompson has brought a great program to look at curriculum, look at all different aspects of the district. I encourage everyone to keep working with the Navigate15 process. But overall a couple of other things superintendent Thompson brought up at the last board meeting – these STEM academies that will bring different groups of students throughout the district to form an academy within the district that different teachers can come and watch, different students can come and watch and participate in throughout the whole district. So I think that will be a key one. One of the other things I think is that we should start a second language earlier within the schools process, not in the 6th or 7th grade. I think we should look into 2nd or 3rd grade.

Chapman – The fact is the curriculum is really the business of the professionals. And by that I mean we need to recruit and retain high quality teachers. That has more impact on the quality of curriculum than anything else. We also need to maintain high quality administrative leadership in that area and I think we have done that. What the Board needs to do is monitor the results of the curriculum and based on the results that they get – if there should be goals set for improvement in the area. As a Board member I would rely more on the results that we are getting – and then the other thing that the

Board is responsible for is determining the overall tone. One of the things I would like to see is to give more direction towards our staff who are interested in innovation and more flexibility in terms of the programs that we can offer.

Iannuzzelli – People that excel are going to be good at certain things. I think we do that great in our school district. The kids that are excelling at doing great. It is the ones that having difficulties in getting through. Sometimes we need to go back to the basics. Get back to basic reading, math and some language arts. What I see is that we are trying to push some of our students to do something so advanced that some of them are still having a hard time getting past the basic things. We do need to continue to hire and retain good excellent teachers.

Sriram – Would like to point everyone to the website vote135.org where I posted a white paper on strengthening the curriculum. Please read at your leisure. District 15 is actually one of the top school districts in the state of Illinois. Wants to commend all of the teachers, all the administration, parents – the entire community for putting in the hard work and effort to bring the school to this great heights. Having said that I think we still need to look ahead and understand that children are all individuals. We need to understand how each child learns and that is the key to us taking our education system forward. Math and sciences need focus but also we also need focus on extracurricular activities like music, art. Math and science exercise the left side of your brain – the right side of the brain is exercised by the other extracurricular activities. In addition we need to support things like science competitions, math Olympics – for everyone, not just higher performing students – generally for everyone so that everyone tries to learn differently.

Q3: There has been much made of board majorities. How would you work to keep the Board moving forward and create a more collaborative environment?

Ekeberg – I think that one of the things that is important is to educate yourself and the IASB does quite a wonderful job offering many courses on board governance, school finance, things like Roberts Rules of Order. All of those are important steps in learning how to be a board member. I don't think any of us come into this world trained to be on a school board. It's a new experience. I think you have to take advantage of the educational opportunities and I think you have to work in a collaborative structure to move the district forward.

Seiffert – I think what we need to do as a board is try to get rid of the majority thing that everyone thinks is out there. One of the things that is key is once a decision is made within the board, I think the board members, everyone has their opinion but as a decision is made and finalized the board needs to come together and work together on this. Everyone has an opinion or dissenting view here or there or some idea they would like to put forward but I think as a Board, everyone needs to get together once a decision is made, get behind it and work forward. Do these things positively and go forward as a team and try to cut out all of the dissension within there and work as a team and go forward.

Chapman – I am a strong advocate that believes that a Board is a team and it ought to work together in the spirit of teamwork. That said, that team cannot control how individual people behave. So it is more than what we want to do on an individual basis, it is a matter of the commitment that the other six members of the team bring to that. By that I mean is – what I learned that the board members that do the best job in terms of providing teamwork are those that are the best trained to be on their job. As indicated, the Illinois School Boards Association has a tremendous number of training sessions and those on the board that have given their time and effort – the kind of members that go to that training come back with an understanding of what it means to be respectful, and how you can have difference of opinion without being disagreeable. And lastly that when a board makes a decision – it is the responsible of the board members to honor and respect that decision.

Iannuzzelli – First thing is that being on the board you have to come to a consensus rather than having a debate. So when I talk about that – you need to be able to communicate, you need to be able

to understand that certain things you are not going to agree with but you need to come to a fair consensus on that. You can't just have half the board vote or the majority voting the same way all the time. You need to work together and work out the issues. I believe you need to have more discussion than ten seconds on a specific subject. Just like in any business you can come to better decisions. Decisions are made better when you have more time to discuss those. The other thing you have to maintain is communication – not only with the board obviously but you also have to have a good understanding with the administration and the Community. I can't stress that enough as I am up here talking that the Community is also a part of that – in how the board gets along with the Community is also important.

Sriram – Communication is actually a two-way street. You speak and you listen. So it is not only the art of speaking, it is the art of listening that is very key when you are representing a board. Understanding that there are seven individuals representing seven areas of a diverse community. Everyone is trying to do the best they can to represent their community and the diverse problems that the community faces. So seven ideas from seven people can potentially become one great idea given the chance that we all explain the process in getting to that right decision. We need to get to that common understanding and if we get to that as a board, as a team, we can achieve what we don't have right now.

Herr – Thinks Gerard raised a very important point – that is the difference between majority rule and consensus rule. I think the board should always strive to try first for consensus. Have a good debate on the important issues and try to reach consensus across all seven members. But in the end the majority decision is the final decision. The model that I would like to think about is that of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court does strive for consensus but in the end sometimes it doesn't. Thinks that is quite healthy to have oral arguments that are publicly stated. It is a very good model; obviously we don't have to be that formal in District 15. But to be realistic, we do independently represent the community and there will be differences of opinion.

Q4: The District 15 allocation of local property taxes is one third of the total tax bill. The projected District 15 budget has annual deficit spending. What specific budget reductions would you propose to reduce spending or would you propose a property tax increase?

Seiffert – I would not propose a property tax increase. Some of the specifics that we need to look at and what has been brought up is to talk to the teachers and we have successfully garnered that move. To talk to them about the contract and go forward. But in the last couple of board meetings the administration has brought together – obviously the pension and the salaries are the biggest part of it so we need to work within that. But there is also about 15 to 16% of the other budget that we need to bring forward every line item, wherever we can cut, wherever we can save – we need to take advantage of that. And it sounds small, only 15% but every little bit we can save will benefit us in the long run. There are a couple of specifics with the contract and then within all of the other line items throughout the budget, let's take a look at those and go forward on those.

Chapman – This is an example where I think the Board really needs to have discussions on every option that is available. We need to talk about the impact. So I am open-minded in terms of where we need to make the cuts and what we need to do to balance the budget. We have already directed the administration to come to us later in the spring with options that we have and the impact those options have. Once those are on the table then I am looking forward to a dialogue with all of the other board members to come to some kind of resolution/conclusion as to what the best direction is.

Iannuzzelli – I don't believe that we should have a tax increase. I don't think there should be any cutting in education staff. However I do believe – as I said in my last statement – I believe that we need to come to some consensus and a fair approach to this. I think that being on the board and looking at some other projects that are going on, and really focusing on the needs of the Community

rather than the wants and what we would like to have, rather than what we need. Obviously safety for children would be first for me, and making sure those projects are funded. And looking at the other ones – just to make sure that we are spending in the right place. Are we doing things that maybe we really don't need to do right now. I believe that you need to work it out and see what is out there and really prioritize. I believe in planning, a board that plans would really help that.

Siriram – I will answer the second question first. I would not support a tax increase with the project deficits we have. I think that is totally wrong to impose that on our residents of this community especially in this tough economic times. I can explain a balance sheet – there are inputs and some outputs coming out. As the inputs, we are taking the revenue and as an output, we are giving out the salaries and benefits which are 85% - more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of our current balance sheet. We are giving the remaining for expenses for operations of the district. We need to look at that more than $\frac{3}{4}$ s of where we are spending. We need to be together as a community, as a team to look at where can we cut. Can we take certain freezes? Can we do some of these items that we are looking at now at a later date? What is the priority of the things that we are trying to do right now? Having all of that listed and working as a team, that is the key – that will help us.

Herr – I too would not support a tax increase. Just like all of the families in the community we need to live within our means. To give some perspective, the deficit is a growing problem. This year the deficit will be about \$4 million dollars, it grows over time so that over the next five years, the total accumulated deficit will be \$47 million dollars. So it is not a small problem. Yet I think if we take strong action we can solve this problem. About a month ago, I posted on my website a specific plan. I won't go through all of the details but the essence of it is to get the Community together and to look at the spending. Number two, we need to have a long range capital plan. The roofs don't fail all at once. We know that they fail over time. The current \$18 million dollar project list includes roofs that won't need replacement for another five to 10 years. And last we need to look at salaries and benefits which total about 83% of the total spending.

Ekeberg – I would also say No on the tax increase. I think the administration brought forward a message that they are looking at ways to cut spending that least impact the classroom. And I think the board supports that. The other avenue that is coming forward is through Navigate15 – the Community is going to have a chance to declare what they think is most important for the budget as we move forward. And I look for some guidance from the Community.

Q5: Parents are vital to the success of every school and it seems that the Board focuses solely on finances these days. What would you do as a Board member to increase parental engagement in the District 15 schools?

Chapman – Agree with the part of the question that had to do that the board focuses on finances. We need to get more focus in terms of – as I indicated earlier – and get back to the focus on our educational programs, quality of the programs we have – and what happens relative to those students who are not meeting the level of success that we would like them to have. Relative to the role that parents play, we have had an active PTA and thinks that has been a tremendous support. Our educational foundation has been very active and has provided significant funds for programs that we otherwise cannot fund. I think that one of the most significant is the Navigate15 which is expands not only the role of the parents but also the people in our community. That come and help our superintendent to get direction on a number of issues. It starts with an outline of what we are doing in certain areas and then provides the opportunity for input. I am quite anxious to see what the results of that will be in June.

Iannuzzelli – To get parents involved. I think that this district does a great job with announcing what is going on, with trying to get parents out there. Navigate15 is a good start and I believe that we need to get the word out more. When hardly anyone comes out to these things, nobody really knows what is

going on in the community. We need to get the word out – using technology. We can talk to people on the moon but we can't talk to people right down the street in Palatine and tell them what is going on? We need to come up with different ways to do that. We need to get parents to be excited about what is going on. It is difficult these days because – like in my family – both of the parents do work and they need to in order to survive in this economy. How do we do that? I'm willing to be open with the Community and work my ideas out with them – and say What is going to excite you to come and learn and be part of your children's education?

Sriram – Navigate15 is a good informational tool for the community. Thinks it needs to be grown. As is, in the current format, it is very very formal. It needs to become more informal for parents to give input as they chose and please to do. There are two ways to get the parents involved. One is communication with the parents. Schools need to communicate with the parents because oftentimes what I hear from my children is not what I hear from the teachers. There is some sort of disconnect between what I am hearing from the school and what I am hearing from the children. That is the crux of the problem. If there is proper communication between the parents and the schools – the parents will be more involved because every parent here is dying to get involved in their children's life. I have seen it in many schools. So proper communication and two way communication is key.

Herr – This is a very critical issue and a very complex one as well. A lot of parents are both working and it is very difficult for them to be as involved as they might like. Thinks it is also a very collaborative issue. It is very important for the educators in the classroom to work individually with the parents to find solutions that work for each parent. Just like each child has their own unique learning styles, each parent involvement – how that works really depends individually on those parents. So I think working collaboratively with the educators and the parents together – figuring out what works is part of the solution.

Ekeberg – I would like to thank the PTA. I believe that when my children were going through this district – that was one of the organizations that provided access for me to bring my children back to the school in the evening and do something with them at school with other children and other parents. Not everyone could take advantage of that or did take advantage of it but it was certainly rewarding from my perspective. I would also point out that Navigate15 came forward, planning to bring a recommendation to the Board in June which they are going to do. But one of the things that there was high interest in was curriculum. From Navigate15, Mr. Thompson wants to move forward with a permanent curriculum committee in the community to bring recommendations forward – which I think is ideal.

Seiffert – We keep touching base on Navigate15. I would say it is not hardly attended, at the last two meetings there have been anywhere from 150 to 180 people there. I think the key is that if everyone of those people could bring one more. We need to get the parents out and involved. I got on the PTA at Jane Addams and we have a renewed excitement about what is going on in our school. I think we need to be able to broadcast that throughout the district. So I say that would be one. I see a lot of faces that have attended Navigate15 and I encourage you to continue to do it. But if we all can bring a partner. As we get to the different parts of the curriculum and as these different steps go forward, that Superintendent Thompson brings out each one – that everyone needs to voice their opinion. It is an open forum, everyone needs to come out and give their opinion and what they would like to see within it. I encourage Navigate15 to be attended very well.

Q9: Since the Board is responsible for negotiating on the behalf of the Community, do you believe it is a conflict of interest to accept campaign contributions from employee groups?

Ekeberg – Yes

Moderator – (long pause) would you like to embellish or are you satisfied?

Ekeberg – I don't think you should accept campaign contributions from employee groups.

Seiffert – I would echo that. I would say No we should not take contributions from the organized union or any groups.

Chapman – I agree.

Iannuzzelli – No, I never have and never will.

Sriram – Would like to put it in perspective for these elections. I would define conflict of interest as a decision influenced by board member with monetary, in-kind or any other form of benefit. Doesn't think they should be accepting any kind of money from the unions. That totally makes us indebted to them in the long run.

Herr – Also agrees that it would be a conflict of interest to accept any contributions and is opposed to that.

Q10: What do you feel is the number one job of a school board member?

Seiffert – I believe a school board member, we as a whole, as an individual member is to make sure we have the right administration in place. To make sure we hire the right administration that they are bringing the correct ideas to us as a board to vote on those. We need to lean heavily on the experts. I am not in the teacher business, haven't been in the education business – I would love to recommend what we can do about ice cream – but that's a different subject. We need to lean on the administration to make sure we have the right people in place to bring us the right recommendations and build this thing as we go forward. Think we are on the right track. As was stated earlier, we have had a lot of turnover in the last couple of years and I believe with Superintendent Thompson and Mike Adamczyk and their leadership as we go forward, we are on the right track and hopefully we can retain them as administrators and continue to retain teachers throughout the district.

Chapman – The number one job of the school board is to hire a competent and highly qualified superintendent.

Iannuzzelli – I think the job of a board member is to obviously work with the other board members to make decisions that affect the education of our children. I have said this in almost every question and I will say it again – I believe that part of the board members responsibility is to be almost a liaison, to open up with the Community. It is part of that responsibility to share what they have done to bring what the Community is saying back to the board and to be a spokesman to them, as well as the educators. Superintendent and staff.

Sriram – The board members are a team, they bridge the gap between the Community and the school administration. You take the feedback that the Community provides and translate it for the administration to make all of them understand what is needed – and set goals for the future of our children's' education.

Herr – Will echo a little bit of what Gerard and Manjula just said. The Illinois Association of School Boards have identified six fundamental duties of a school board member. The one that I want to focus on is that of connecting with the Community. They said in one of their handouts – “the school board engages in an ongoing two-way conversation with the entire Community” It is our job as school board members to represent the entire Community, not just any special interest. We are representatives of the entire Community. That really doesn't happen right now. What happens right now is a one-way dialogue. There is an agenda item on the board meetings that Citizens Address the Board. It is one way, there is no response, it is five minutes. Thinks that is inadequate representation of the community.

Ekeberg – I believe the number one job is the selection of the superintendent. Secondary to that is that the board sets policy based on the Community's standards and then looks at the job that the superintendent performs and measures his performance against those policies that the board has set.

Q12: Do you think that the district has been successful in stemming the tide of administrators leaving for other districts? If not, what should be done to keep talented administrators in our schools and district offices?

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