

The Columbus Dispatch Voter's Guide

Candidate Questionnaire – Westerville Board of Education

Candidate: Jim Burgess



Education: Business Management and Broadcast Operations degrees with Accounting Certificate. Graduated Cum Laude.

Experience: 5 Yrs Personnel Management - Business Analysis & Process Improvement - Project Management - Global Business experience - Worked for Computer, Banking, Manufacturing & Transportation companies.

Family: Married to a wonderful teacher. Father of 3 - High School freshman, 7th grader and 4 yr old.

Campaign Website: www.forResponsibleChange.com

The fate of the magnet schools has been a point of debate for the district for the past few years. The program was cut nearly two years ago but continues to operate in a pared-down form. What should become of the program and the aging buildings that housed it?

The magnet program's educational results have been exemplary. I want to restore it in its entirety. However, decisions of the school board already in place may make that difficult. Immediate action is necessary to save it.

This is a classic case for the Students First management approach that Luke Davis, John Sodt and I will bring to the school district. Under Students First, this program would have stayed in place, and any cuts necessary would have been made in areas that do not directly affect the education of students.

Think about going to a restaurant which is having a slow business period. If the manager responds by cutting the size of your dinner portion, will you go back and spend more of your money there? The business would make cuts in areas which do not affect its customers. The school board should operate the same way. Students and parents should be the last people to feel the effects of any needed cost reductions. For a fuller explanation of Students First, please visit our website at www.ForResponsibleChange.com.

Let's save the magnet program!

With 40 percent of college-bound Ohio students needing remedial coursework, how can the school board work to better ensure that Westerville graduates are fully prepared for college or careers?

Although I have attended school board meetings for more than two years, I have never heard this subject discussed there. I am grateful that the Dispatch is asking about it. When I bring it up in personal conversations, those who were previously unaware of it usually respond with shock and disappointment. They remind me that they chose to live in the school district because they expected a much higher level of educational achievement. A near 40% remedial rate is an unacceptable level, and as a result, I believe many people with school-age children now are moving out or sending them to private schools.

The district employs around a thousand teachers and administrators with impressive education credentials. I know they are capable of turning out better results. One of the primary duties of a school board is to challenge the system to provide the best possible educational outcomes for our students. Many of our educators have claimed for years that “teaching to the test” does not lead to optimal performance. I believe them. We should reassess that practice, and challenge them to strive for better results. Instead of a 40% remediation rate, let’s have 40% of our graduates testing out of basic college classes because they got such a great education in Westerville!

What can be done to strengthen the middle-school program?

Our middle school curriculum offerings fall well behind those of other comparable Central Ohio school districts. We need to restore a full range of courses so our students will have a better foundation for high school, and will be competitive when applying to the colleges of their choice. As in the case of the magnet program, the school board chose to cut back on quality of education when less essential options were available.

When my four-year-old daughter is graduated from the Westerville system, I want her to have the same level of preparation that students in Bexley, Dublin, Olentangy and other districts received. The quality of leadership on the school board will determine whether she gets it.

What program areas do you believe the district should focus on, and how can they be improved?

Our schools should focus on three primary paths of learning:

1. A solid foundation in reading, writing, math and science must be provided to every student at every grade level. Without this basic foundation, we have failed our students.
2. For those who are college-bound, a path of higher learning must be available as a basis for college-level coursework. This must include an effort to instill a passion for learning and an ability to work independently.
3. For the career-oriented student, fundamental life skills must be taught as part of a core curriculum. “Learning how to learn” is an essential element of a successful career in any field, and it must be emphasized here.

Our first challenge is to fix the disparity that exists in our foundational classes. All buildings must perform at consistently high levels.

Next, we must create a plan that lays out three-year, five-year and ten-year roadmaps to improvement. This plan must involve total collaboration, involving teachers, students, parents, employers and all other constituent parties in the district.

How do you assess the district's financial position? What can be done to improve it?

The district is in good financial position following passage of the last tax levy. With prudent management, we can improve upon it. We have more than enough revenue to deliver education effectively. I see no reason for any tax increases in the next several years.

We need to follow sound practices in district operations, matching those we see in the businesses around us. Luke Davis, John Sodt and I have identified areas in which we believe we can save millions of dollars annually. Many of our best ideas have grown out of discussions with employees of the school district, and others have come from residents and local businesspeople with experience in areas we need to address. Should the three of us be fortunate enough to be elected, we will implement a formal program of soliciting ideas and a structure within which we will review and act on them as appropriate.

For a more detailed explanation of how we can stretch your tax dollars, please visit us at www.ForResponsibleChange.com.

What steps do you believe the board can take to engage the community and heal community rifts?

Aretha Franklin had it right. It's all about R-E-S-P-E-C-T! When you hold public office, you are elected to represent a broad range of people with a variety of perspectives. Our school board and our district personnel must understand that differences in opinion do not denote a lack of interest in or dedication to our schools. When parents ask for a change in policy, there is usually a reason for it. When someone suggests a different way of doing something, they do it because they want to help make things better. Over the years, our schools have lost an enormous amount of community support from people who once contributed actively to their betterment. They felt taken for granted, and drifted away.

One of my personal goals is to create a Code of Conduct for dealing with the public. It will apply to every member of the Board of Education, every employee, and every contractor we hire. We need to reinforce the attitude that we serve the public, not vice versa. We must recognize that we are entrusted with the most precious things in most people's lives, their children. When we forget any of that, we lose community support, and our schools ultimately suffer.

Recognition awards and engagement committees are fine as far as they go. But treating people with respect and appreciation is a day-to-day effort, and it should be one of our top priorities going forward.

What makes you the best candidate for this job?

I believe that those best qualified to serve meet these criteria:

1. Background working in companies with budgets of \$100 million or more. Based on observations from visiting all 50 states and while on global assignments for multi-national companies, I am convinced that experience in operations, supervision, finance and related fields are needed to effectively produce quality education. Inability to handle responsibility of this scope results in decisions such as those to cut middle school, sports and magnet programs when it isn't necessary.
2. Belief in the value of a well-rounded education. I have had this imbued in me by a wife and a mother who are teachers. As a cum laude graduate with multiple college degrees, I know that education extends beyond the classroom. Extra-curriculars are as essential to education as classroom learning.
3. High ethical and moral character. Board members set an example for every student and employee in the school district. That is why Luke Davis, John Sodt and I refused to engage in a blatant conflict of interest at the start of this campaign. Public service demands a higher standard.
4. Visionary outlook. Luke, John and I have adopted a Students First management plan to make decisions based on the best interests of students, parents and taxpayers. No other candidates have done so.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell the voters?

Election of a single good candidate will not improve the school district. If you want to see positive change, better educational results and more capable management, it is necessary to change the overall composition of the school board. Please consider voting for Jim Burgess, Luke Davis and John Sodt for responsible change.