

CNC / PTA Council  
2017 School Board Candidate Questionnaire  
for School Districts 65 and 202  
Evanston/Skokie, Illinois

**Part I - Involvement**

Candidate for District  65 or  202

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Occupation: retired

Educational Background: B.S. Biology, SUNY Brockport, Ph.D. Biochemistry, Michigan State U, M.A. Teaching, National Louis U

Volunteer or Community Activities: (current) Chicago section American Chemical Society board (ACS) chair for high school education; Grace Lutheran Church (Evanston) treasurer, choir, usher, miscellaneous; ACS Science coach; Union Concerned Scientist Clean Energy Advocate; American Association of Chemistry Teachers (AACT) webinar presenter; (past) Grace Lutheran Church Council member and Chair, Sunday school director; AYSO coach; Skokie Indians Little league coach; Ultimate Frisbee sponsor at ETHS; Massachusetts state science fair judge

Other Experience: Teacher at ETHS 2001 - 2015; School Improvement Team (SIT) at ETHS; Grading Committee at ETHS 2013 - 2015; AP reader (grader) 2011 - present; AP chemistry community contributor 2011 - present;

Do you have children?  Yes  No

What school(s) do (did) they attend? Walker, Chute, ETHS grads (2005, 2008)

How long have you lived in Evanston/Skokie? 27 years

**Part II - Platform**

1. What motivated you to run for school board this year?

There are several ways for me to answer. In retirement, I've been blessed with both time and a set of skills. As such, I am called to give back to the community in response to those blessings. Last spring, I was asked to run for Chair of the Chicago American Chemical Society section. As I had put my name into contention to fill the school board vacancy in 2015 that ultimately Anne Sills filled, I had been planning to run for the ETHS board this year. Recognizing that I could not do both, I labored long over the decision. I ultimately decided on running for the school board as I felt that the need was greater, and perhaps I could accomplish more good there.

2. What personal qualities, training or experience do you have that would be of value as a school board member? (Please answer briefly in essay form and do not attach a resume.)  
All the candidates care deeply for our school and community, so that does not distinguish us, but we all come from different experiences. My background as both a teacher and a scientist enables me to be good at interpreting data, proposing solutions, and, importantly, having insight into the lives of our students. Over my time at ETHS, I've had the privilege of teaching some of our strongest, and some of our weakest, students. They had very different needs and experiences, and I learned some ways to give each what they needed, which is at the heart of equity in education.

Let me briefly give an example. At the very beginning of my general chemistry class, I asked the students to arrange a meeting between their family and me. I wanted to establish lines of communication, help make the families comfortable with me, and make clear that we - the students, their family, and me, were a team that wanted to help the student succeed. I didn't do this in AP; they needed other things from me.

3. If elected, what will be your top three priorities as a school board member?  
My first priority will be to listen. We have many community, and school groups who have much to contribute to our efforts to improve ETHS; I can't pretend that I have all the answers, or even all the questions.

My highest priority has to be to improve the educational outcome for all, but particularly for our minority students. This is, of course, the first listed goal of the board, and I wholeheartedly agree with it.

The second goal listed for the board is to 'connect each student with supports to ensure that each student will experience socio-economic development and enhanced academic growth.' When I was on the School Improvement Team (SIT), we invested a lot of time and effort on ways to better make those connections, both for students and families. The problem is timing - most of us only tend to listen when we perceive a need. How do we communicate at that time? Again, ETHS has many efforts directed towards this goal, but I feel that it is too easy to miss students in need. One strategy that I would like to explore with the board is the New Trier Advisory model. In that model, there is a staff member who is with a group of students for their tenure at the school. They not only develop a good relationship, but can serve as a means of communicating what ETHS can do to those students when they need it. Although this would necessitate restructuring our daily schedule and may have costs, it can supplant a number of other efforts that we currently make.

4. What should the school board's responsibility be to the community? To parents? How should voters assess the effectiveness of the board and its individual members?  
One thing that we owe families is a seamless experience of expectation and challenge for the students throughout their educational experience. This will require ever greater collaboration with district 65.

We have to hear the concerns of the community and staff. That is how we will get feedback on the effects of our actions.

The board needs to be as transparent as possible, explaining our actions clearly and early in the process.

It is a difficult thing to measure the effectiveness of the board and its members. As I've sat in board meetings, I found myself listening to the questions that each board member asked of whichever presenter was speaking. There were many insightful questions, and I would encourage using this to decide which board members are effective. As for the board as a group, I think that each person will look at ETHS and find things that are important to them, and that's what they would have to use to assess the board's, and the school's, effectiveness.

I will argue that we should not use the PARCC test as a tool to determine the board, or the school's effectiveness. For this test and its predecessor, the major failing was that the student had no 'skin in the game', meaning that it doesn't affect them how they perform on the test. How can we get meaningful data under those conditions? AP tests carry more value, but even there the scores don't matter sometimes, and of course, not every course is AP, nor does every student take AP. As a simple tool, perhaps the ACT, and now the SAT, is useful.

5. What are the major strengths of the school district? How can we build on them? What are its major weaknesses? How can we address them?

ETHS has a dedicated community, talented and experienced teachers and staff, and administrators who constantly strive to make us better. We care! This makes campaigning a challenge, because there's nothing blatant to point to and say, 'look, we need to fix this'. We build on what we have by better integration of all the parts in a student's education. And this may be our weakness; we are not as integrated, particularly with district 65, as would best serve our children. Given that the staff and administration have to focus on the day-to-day affairs of the school, it is incumbent on the two school boards to make our expectations and student experiences as consistent and as transparent as possible. I'll offer one example from my personal experience. About ten years ago when teachers from the two districts had an opportunity to meet, it was pointed out that students do not need to pass a science course in order to graduate eighth grade. That is not so to graduate from ETHS. What message does this send to our children? We cannot have this kind of disparity.

6. Describe your understanding of school board governance and the role of the board versus the roles of the superintendent and the administration.

The short answer is that my understanding is limited, as I'm not on the board currently. It would seem that the board serves two functions. We are the interface between the school and the community. We should listen, and we should communicate; we serve Evanston. Within the school, we are the 'big idea' group. The board directs and monitors the functioning of ETHS, and guides the educational and operational philosophy, but the administration and staff take that guidance and shape it to carry out those ideas. They handle the 'nuts and bolts' of education.

7. Select two major decisions made by the school board within the last four years about which you have a strong opinion. Explain why you agree or disagree with these decisions.

I'm not sure that I would describe this as major, but a school 'goal' several years ago was to get more students involved in extracurricular activities. Without knowing the motives of the board, as a teacher I interpreted this as a response to data suggesting that students who participate in extracurriculars tend to be better academic performers. However, I don't believe that such participation caused better academic performance. Rather, those students who tend to do well in school also tend to get involved with the school. In essence, I feel that the board had cause and effect backwards. Of note, this is no longer a board goal although student socio-emotional development is.

The one that I agree with, and which I'd like to discuss, is from more than four years ago, but it is of ongoing importance. There was a decision that we needed to have more explicit conversations about race. As a white male, I had not realized how much race impacts the daily lives of many of our students, because I did not see how it affected mine. The mechanism that was employed to bring about these conversations (the Pacific Education Group or PEG) was controversial, and I think somewhat ineffective, because it started from a premise that made white members of the community immediately defensive, and thus less likely to truly engage in open conversation. For me fortunately, I had facilitators that were less confrontational, and I think that we were better able to engage in meaningful conversations because of that.

I want to defend myself here a little. The decisions I chose are older, but I think that we have to recognize, particularly in our accelerated society, that it may take a long time for the effects of decisions to be felt. Certainly in the case of racial conversations, I feel that we are still in the infancy of that effort, and that the outcome of that decision is still in our future. As painful as it is to be patient, particularly when it comes to the education of our own children, sometimes patience is what we need.

### **Part III – Student Achievement and Assessment**

8. If elected, describe how you will contribute toward enhancing student achievement. How should the district address the needs of students in the top and bottom quartiles of the achievement spectrum? How should the district address achievement disparities by race, ethnicity, or other demographic differences?

As both a scientist and teacher who primarily taught those in the top and bottom quartile, I feel uniquely qualified to help analyze the data that we collect. The district has wisely undertaken disaggregating academic data by race, ethnicity, and gender. In the broadest sense, I want to ensure that students are prepared to succeed in a class when they take it. What this means to me is that prior course work has been appropriate, and the student has learned the material well enough, to enter a class with every expectation that they can do the work at a high level. From my own teaching experience, 2 chem/phys did precisely that for 3 chem/phys. But many of my students entering general chemistry were not well-prepared to learn chemistry.

To address this, I have to emphasize again our need to integrate more strongly with district 65,. But even within ETHS, we can do better. Although this falls into the 'nuts and bolts' issue that I referred to earlier, we could have better communication of needs and

goals between departments. For example, in science, we need students to do fairly simple math, but with unfamiliar units such as grams per liter. In fact, students can use the units to inform them what math operation to do, but they appeared to have little experience with that from their math classes. Should they or is that something better taught in science classes? If so, when? At the middle school level or at ETHS? Maybe the board can ask these questions, but the teachers and administrators should be the ones deciding on the answers.

How do race, ethnicity, and gender overlay this conversation? What can we do to ensure that all students are prepared to succeed? That is where our efforts to work with the community and district 65 become more important. Again, the board has wisely worked assiduously here, and I believe that answers to student success lie outside ETHS walls as much as inside, so that we must also work outside those walls.

9. What role should standardized testing have in assessing students, teachers, and instructional methods?

Standardized tests can serve several functions if applied well. I've already indicated that PARCC is not being applied well. We use several others, and there may be yet other standardized tests of value.

AP test scores are one example. They tell us how ETHS and our students perform relative to those outside our community. The students have some vested interest in performing well on these tests, so that the results carry some validity to allow us to assess how well the students, the school, and the teachers, are performing.

How valuable is the ACT or, now, the SAT? While students who are interested in going onto college value the outcome of these tests, are our courses targeted specifically at performance on them, and should they be? Those are wonderful questions! In my conversations, I've heard of parents that remark that their child is doing well in classes but not on the ACT. Do they feel misled? If we do not target our courses at standardized tests, then we need to make that clear to our families and students.

Are there other standardized tests for our non-AP classes, and do they have value? In chemistry, the American Chemical Society does have a test that could be used; should we? Only if our staff and administration feel that the test reflects what we wish our students to learn! Are there tests like this for other courses? I'm sure there are – other states, such as NY, have state exams towards that very end. But until we decide that we want to 'teach to those tests', they would not be useful.

Personally, I'd like to see standardized tests that reflect our classroom goals. We chemistry teachers created our own test at the behest of our administration, which we did design to reflect our goals, and it was useful to me in determining whether I was accomplishing those goals with my students.

## **Part IV – Student, School & Parental Partnerships**

10. Explain your vision for student, parent and school partnerships. How do these differ from Cradle to Career and other community partnerships?

After speaking with Sheila Merry at Cradle to Career (C2C) and others around the community, there does appear to be a consensus that we want to support families throughout childhood, particularly with respect to reading. The district 65 report on black achievement that came out in Spring 2016 served as a clarion call to me: Even in kindergarten, low income and black students were performing lower in several attributes believed to contribute to academic success. I have spoken with several faith community leaders who feel that those communities can play an important role in this effort, and I agree, hoping that logistics can be addressed.

What can ETHS do? It is already a partner with C2C. While we may not be able to help directly with pre-K efforts, once children are in school, particularly during summers, we can provide space for reading. Many students are also a population that would be happy to serve as either readers, or perhaps mentors to young children, and again, we can provide a safe, supervised space for those interactions.

Finally, there are many others in Evanston giving a lot of thought to these efforts, and for me, listening to them, rather than assuming I have the answers, may be the best short term course of action.

11. What is your vision for the partnership between District 65 and District 202? Which areas of collaboration are most important and why?

If we were one school district, what would look different? I would like to believe that the expectations for student performance would be consistent and clear, that supports for students would be age and developmentally appropriate, that communication and interaction with families would be easy, encouraged, and common. Our collaboration should make it appear as though we were one district. For me as a former teacher, I am most interested in the expectations. Both Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards lay out a progression of learning outcomes through the grade levels. These serve as a model and tool to align those expectations and outcomes for Evanston students..

## **Part V - Budget**

12. How will you influence fiscal efficiencies at the school district?

Engineering is about solving problems given goals and constraints. In this case, one of my priorities has to be to honor the constraint of fiscal responsibility. I will work hard to find ways to improve the education for all at ETHS while also seeking ways to control costs. I don't believe that we need more money to achieve our educational goals.

So what does this mean? As a teacher, I would ask myself, will students use this later in the class and/or outside the classroom? If not, then why would I teach it? I would apply that same strategy to our spending. As a school, we have invested a lot of money in technology – chromebooks for all students, computer centers, wifi, etc. Have we questioned whether this has had a positive impact on student performance? The H

hallway on the first floor was just remodeled. It's beautiful, but could our resources be used to effect educational outcomes better? I will ask these questions..

Finally, state funding is an important issue which remains a large unknown at the moment. I have established relationships with Representatives Fine and Gabel, as well as Senator Biss, and will maintain conversations with each about the situation in Springfield.

13. If budget cuts are necessary, which areas deserve priority and why?

I have not studied the budget in detail, so before proposing cuts, I would not only have to see what we spend, but hear from those carrying out those actions, what the spending does for our students. My priority would be to preserve those budgetary items that most serve our students. I recognize that determining this is not trivial, but keeping the larger goal in mind can help clarify the decision process.

To give you examples of how I applied fiscal restraint as a teacher, the classroom in which I taught has not been remodeled since the 70s, and it looks it. However, I was able to do for the students what needed to be done, and so I didn't push to have it improved. I didn't want a computer in the classroom until there was also a projector, because that enabled it to become a useful tool rather than a distraction. These represent my thought processes on spending.