CNC / PTA Council
2015 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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Facebook, Twitter, etc.: FB – Richard Rykhus – District 65 School Board member

Occupation: Director, Technology & Innovation at Grant Thornton
Educational Background:

MA, Northwestern University, School of Education and Social Policy - Learning Sciences
BA, Michigan State University, College of Business – Marketing
BA, Michigan State University, College of Arts and Letters – Spanish

Volunteer or Community Activities:

Evanston CASE (Citizens for Appropriate Special Education) – board member and advocate for appropriate special education services for students with special needs, primarily in District 65. *2009 – 2011*.
GLSEN Chicago – worked to create safe schools for high school students and teachers, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Served as board member, board chair and Executive Director. *1995 – 2005*

Do you have children? ☒ Yes ☐ No
What school(s) do (did) they attend? D65 Early Childhood at JEH, Lincolnwood, Dawes

How long have you lived in Evanston/Skokie? 8 ½ years

Part II – Platform

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

When I first ran for D65 School Board, I was motivated by two primary factors. First, public education is in my blood. My father was a K-12 administrator and my mother taught high school math. They showed me the importance of public education - that it is a cornerstone of our society. Second, I had many questions about the quality of board governance 4 years ago and saw an opportunity to bring a higher level of analysis and accountability to the Board's decision making process.

As I seek re-election, I do so recognizing that we have made substantial progress in some areas, but have much more critical work to do. We have put in place some foundational elements for future success and having continuity in board governance will be essential to continue making progress, in my view. I remain committed to creating the opportunity for every child to succeed and am excited at the prospect of serving on the Board to help realize our District's potential.

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.)**

Among the various qualifications I provide, I'd highlight a few.
First, I am the only candidate for D65 School Board that has already served a full term and have provided leadership as both the Board Vice-President and the Finance Committee Chair. I bring an understanding of the Board process, roles, and a valuable historical perspective of what has worked and what has not.

Second, I have a varied educational and professional background. Over the years I have gained experience in school, non-profit and corporate settings, playing leadership roles in projects focused on strategy, learning and technology, among many others. I'm able to apply this varied experience to the work of the Board.

Third, my family experience also shapes my viewpoint. As the father of a young Black man, and as a gay man married to a Mexican man, my world perspective is shaped by the diverse characteristics of my own family. As we seek varied perspectives on the Board, I am able to contribute in that manner.

Finally, those who know me recognize that I'm inquisitive, caring, analytical and committed. I expect these qualities will continue to serve me and the community well in my Board service.

3. **If elected, what will be your top three priorities as a school board member?**

My priorities will align with the priorities that emerge from the strategic planning process, which has engaged multiple stakeholder groups in our community for deep and broad input.

Three areas that I view as critical to our future success and that I expect will be part of our strategic plan include:

- *Ensuring we have outstanding people serving in their roles across the District.* Without the best people in place, our ability to effect meaningful change and improvement will be limited.
- *Financial sustainability.* Without the proper funding for both operational needs and capital projects, our capacity to help students achieve their highest potential will be constrained in substantial ways.

- *Partnerships with D202 and the community.* Without deep, strategic, collaborative partners, we will not affect the level of change needed in our schools. We simply cannot do it without other key organizations.

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?

After having served on the Board for nearly 4 years, I'm clear that a primary responsibility is to ensure we listen to all stakeholders in the community and help the Administration reconcile the various views of our community, including parents, teachers, administrators, community partners, taxpayers and more. We must listen to all voices, knowing that ultimately we will disagree with some.

As Board member I believe we must review all relevant quantitative data and qualitative information before concluding on any given issues. I also believe that we must continue to improve our focus on evaluation of our work, making certain that we understand the impact of our choices and adjust as the evaluation indicates we should.

On the elements described above I believe that voters should assess collective and individual effectiveness of the Board's work.

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?

We do indeed have many strengths and areas to improve in our District. Some of our strengths include:

- Many committed, capable educators and staff
- Fresh, new dedicated leadership for the District in several key roles
- Community/parent involvement and collaboration
- Solid instructional practices in many areas
- Major improvements made to our infrastructure over the past several years

In terms of weaknesses, I would include:

- Unsustainable financial situation
- Much work remaining to maintain and improve our buildings
- Some areas of curriculum require significant attention
- Deepening critical partnerships and forging new ones in areas that require focus

I believe that each of the areas noted as weaknesses will be covered in our strategic plan and that plan will identify the strategies most likely to have an impact. These strategies will have emerged from conversations with many key stakeholders and in my review of that plan I'll raise questions to ensure my comfort with the selected methods of focus to address these challenges.

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

Most simply, the role of the Board is to manage the superintendent. These activities include hiring, goal setting, providing informal feedback, and formally evaluating his degrees of success. This ideally results in the Board holding the Superintendent accountable while also using opportunities to coach him for the best results possible. The Board must also serve as the eyes and ears of the community, helping the Administrative team understand the realities on the ground in the schools so they have more complete information when making decisions.

At a recent retreat the Board and Superintendent engaged in an exercise reviewing various scenarios to determine how the Board and Superintendent should be involved in each situation. This helped to clarify expectations for these real-world situations and I believe we have operated successfully over the past several months in this regard.

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.**

In addition to the hiring of the new superintendent – a unanimous Board vote – I would highlight two other critical votes.

First a lesser-noticed, but important vote occurred in the spring of 2012. I made a motion for the Board to vote on maintaining fine arts staffing at existing levels, instead of reducing staffing as proposed by the Administration. Ultimately only Tracy Quattrocki and I voted in support of the motion and fine arts staffing reductions occurred. I pursued this issue primarily because it would subsequently require fine arts teachers to work at a minimum of two schools, making it much more difficult for them to provide the same level of high quality programming before, during and after school. Research tells us how important strong fine arts programming is in relation to student success, in particular for struggling students who may be engaged in the arts in ways that they are not in academics. Knowing the impact fine arts can have, I remain committed to maintaining strong fine arts programming in our District.

Second, this fall the Board unanimously approved a change in our suspension policy. When reviewing suspension data, it was evident that our current suspension and alternative to suspension (ATS) practices unfairly and negatively impacted Black and Latino students in D65, primarily since they were offered ATS at a rate of 50% compared with their White peers. The new policy now requires that ATS be offered to all students, except in the most extreme cases. This not only reduces the inequity of prior suspension practices; it also reduces lost instructional time for students who may be at risk. ATS offers a supportive response which engages parents in the process and helps to address underlying causes of suspension-able behavior. I am hopeful that people recognize the positive impact of this change.

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?**

In my view the Board must focus on leading indicators to help us project if we are on track to reaching the higher levels of student success and adjust if we are not. We cannot wait for changes to take effect to see if we achieve the results we hope for. I'll give three brief examples:

- *Rates of early childhood education*. Achievement success correlates with participation in a formal early childhood education program and working with families and community partners to increase participation rates will predictably improve student achievement. The Board needs to monitor and influence this indicator very closely.
- *Summer learning participation rates.* At-risk students need to continue their formal learning over the summer so they don't fall further behind their higher-performing peers. The community offers many opportunities to do this and we need to ensure that 100% of at-risk children have access to one of these programs.
- *Teacher and principal retention rates*. The quality of our principals and teachers is one of the factors that the District controls which also directly impacts student achievement. We must ensure that we develop and retain our most outstanding educators.

With the Board focused on these types of indicators, I believe we can positively influence student achievement. My expectation is that many of these will be included in the strategic plan and in the Superintendent evaluation as well.

Related to the quartiles, I believe that the actions noted in these indicators will help move students out of the bottom quartile. Additionally we need to make sure that we are properly assessing the needs of struggling students and providing the appropriate interventions, not simply labeling a child as having behavior issues without a deeper analysis. For students in the top quartile in the short-term we must continue to improve our curriculum in multiple subject areas to ensure challenge for all students. I expect in the long-term that our efforts to lift up more struggling students will reduce the range of preparedness across which teachers must differentiate, ultimately allowing them to provide new levels of focus on higher-performing students.

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

In my view and according to state law, we must assess our students' levels of academic progress. It's necessary that we track their progress to understand their levels of preparedness for high school, college (if they choose to attend) and their selected careers.

I do believe that we need to review our current complement of assessments to understand the collective effort and impact on the instructional process and on students. This includes a complete understanding of the types, frequency, duration, age appropriateness and alignment of assessment with goals and high school assessments. Many factors have changed in the past two years and I expect we will look with new eyes at how we balance the need to fulfill state

requirements, measure student progress and evaluate our teachers, principals and administrators based on student success.

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?

When we consider how different types of partnerships can impact student success, I think about them in three categories – system-level, school-level and individual-level collaborations. Cradle to career is an example of a system- (or district) level partnership. This initiative has enormous potential to transform the way our public schools serve the community. The school- and individual-level partnerships can be more nimble and are critical to ensure student success. Principals, teachers and parents must serve as a team to support the individual needs of students. Without each of them playing a role, it will be more difficult for each student to achieve their highest potential level of success. While each principal and teacher must take responsibility to build meaningful relationships with their students, it requires involvement from the parents – not necessarily coming to school, but engaging in the appropriate supports at home to provide a foundation for learning.

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

The collaboration between D65 and D202 has improved notably over the past 2 years. Here are a few examples of recent changes:

- We now share a joint literacy goal – the first time in history that the Boards adopted a joint goal.
- We have worked with Northwestern Kellogg students on two separate projects to identify priority areas that we should explore for collaboration.
- We are working to develop a shared achievement report and are exploring more opportunities in the research and assessment departments.
- We continue to explore opportunities for collaboration related to technology.

These have occurred in addition to the existing points of collaboration on curricular work, transition activities from 8th to 9th grade and jointly-submitted RFPs to procure services from auditing and legal firms.

In my view we must continue to focus on curricular alignment and opportunities for operational and/or cost efficiencies. D65 will continue to explore and recommend possibilities to collaborate, based in part on the work that has been completed to date. If the Boards and Administrations can identify a few shared priorities, I have no doubt that we will continue to make meaningful progress in this area.

Part V - Budget

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

Soon after joining the Board I proposed that we engage a Citizens Finance Task Force which ultimately provided many recommendations to manage the expenses and to increase revenues of the District. Some of these ideas have been implemented and others are still under consideration. Though these changes haven't dealt with our underlying structural issues for our funding of operations, they have slowed the growth of our expenses.

As Finance Chair for the past nearly two years, I have worked to influence positively the financial position of D65. I initiated a new focus on the collection of overdue fees (over $300,000) which has produced some return to the District. We continue to apply a more rigorous lens on the investments made in technology. We have also asked the Administration to review our expenses anew with a fine-toothed comb to ensure we are reducing administrative expenses to the greatest extent possible without impacting our students' learning experience.

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

We have already discussed publicly with Dr. Goren that significant budget cuts are a very likely scenario, potentially for the 2016/2017 school year. At this point, I don't believe it would be responsible to say which areas do/don't require cuts. The Board, and I, need to understand the correlation between the investments we make and the impact they have on our students and schools. We have asked the Administration to be prepared to share with the Board their analysis of programmatic impact relative to the expense. Once we have more complete information we will be able to determine the appropriate priorities. As a community we then will need to decide if we are willing to live with the proposed cuts or if we are willing to invest further in our schools, given the current financial climate.