

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

Name: Gretchen Livingston

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Occupation: Attorney

Educational Background: A.B. University of Michigan; J.D. Loyola University of Chicago Law School

Volunteer or Community Activities:

District 202 volunteer activities:

Current Member of District 202 Board and past President; current or past member of Board Committees, including: Finance, Policy, Audit, City-School, Joint District 65/District 202, Community Legislative Group, ED-RED, Oakton Community College Governing Board, Evanston Cradle to Career (Prepared for Adult Life Solution Design Team), PTSA, School Improvement Team, Substance Abuse Team, School-Based Health Center Advisory Board

Other School related volunteer activities:

Past Member of District 65 Wellness Council, Calendar Committee, PTSA Environment Committee Chair and Wellness Team member @Haven; tutor, co-founder of Knitting Club, and room parent @Lincolnwood

Other Volunteer Activities:

Former Board member Interfaith Housing Association of the Northern Suburbs (now known as Open Communities); pro bono practice at Jenner & Block, including successful appeal to IL Supreme Court in a capital case; former Board member and Government relations chair, Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation/IL, coordinated federal and state legislative and grassroots advocacy

Other Experience: Partner, Jenner & Block, Chicago—with practice in environmental litigation, including pro bono work

Do you have children? Yes No

What school(s) do (did) they attend? Cherry Preschool, Heighington Primary (England), Lincolnwood Elementary School, Haven Middle School, ETHS, and Carleton College (one graduate, one junior), Johns Hopkins (one in graduate school)

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

Part II - Platform

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

I am proud of the progress ETHS has made during my 2 terms on the Board. I look forward to continuing that progress if I am re-elected and focusing on areas where ETHS can still improve. Our successes have included work around our first-ever joint Board literacy goal with District 65, increased access and success in honors and AP classes, especially for students of color, increased graduation rates, lowest ever drop-out rate, reduced suspensions, years of balanced budgets and Aaa bond rating, and a partnership with Evanston Cradle to Career. But we have more to do, especially to eliminate differences in achievement based on race, income, disabilities, and language, particularly for students arriving at ETHS reading below grade level (who graduate at lower rates).

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.)

My two terms of Board service, including a two year term as President, has given me the best preparation for continued service. During this time I have completed not just the mandatory training required of all school board members in Illinois (on The Open Meetings Act and the Freedom of Information Act, board governance and finance), but additional training, continuing legal education, programming, and reading provided through the Illinois Association of School Boards, our District law firm, Loyola Law School (my alma mater), Teaching Tolerance, The Center For Tax and Budget Accountability, Advance Illinois, the City of Evanston, the YWCA, and District 65 on topics including equity, diversity, and inclusion, gender identity, legislative developments, issues involving social media and students, curriculum, including access and success in advanced courses for all students, contract negotiation, and superintendent evaluation. In addition, I read extensively on matters related to my Board work. As an attorney I worked on complex litigation that required me to work closely with clients to develop clear objectives and understand the positions of the parties. My work required a focus on research and fact-finding, and flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances. My pro bono legal work and my work as a grassroots advocate in Springfield on health issues demanded that I work with others to achieve difficult objectives, including overturning a decision imposing the death penalty. All of these experiences have helped me to be a better Board member.

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

It would be difficult to limit priorities to just three, because we have four newly adopted goals, and all deserve our attention. But within that goal framework, I would identify the following three areas as priorities: 1) work with District 65 to establish measures for progress towards our joint literacy goal as part of our ongoing effort to eliminate differences in achievement based on race, income, disabilities, and language, particularly for students who do not read at grade level when they arrive at ETHS (and who graduate at lower rates) and share reports of progress or lack thereof under those measures; 2) continue to support Evanston school interests on legislative issues through my leadership role in ED-RED, our school advocacy organization. State dysfunction threatens ETHS' financial stability and our advocacy will be increasingly important; 3) advocate for policies that reduce the differences in discipline predictable by race because students who are not in the classroom cannot succeed.

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?

The Board is accountable to the community, including parents, for the achievement of its goals. The Board, in turn, holds the Superintendent accountable for how he implements the goals. Board members have no individual authority because we can act only as a Board of seven, but Board members should be responsive to community members and their concerns, and refer inquiries as appropriate to the Superintendent for assistance on operational matters. The Board should also reach out to the community for their input, as we have done, on goal development and other matters. Now that we have improved our one way communication (through various channels, including our new app), we need to improve our two way communication to make input from our constituencies easier. Parent/Guardian groups (EBAN and the Latino Advisory Council) are one step in this direction, but we can do more.

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 long history and bragging rights about things impossible to list here. We have tremendous energy and enthusiasm in both our student body and in our staff—one example of which is our voluntary Saturday Wildkit Academy, where hundreds of students and staff come together to study. This energy has translated into a real culture of success, best represented by the improved access and success in our honors and AP courses. The inclusiveness of our community was captured by Dr. Witherspoon in his affirming remarks following the recent election. We have formalized an already strong partnership with Northwestern and other community groups. We need to do more to build on those existing relationships, and work to expand them even more deeply in the community, including as part of the Cradle to Career collective impact effort, so that our students can benefit from our support even outside the doors of the school. It is especially important to reach those who have historically not been as connected to the school, and we need to get more creative in our approach to this underserved population.

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

I said when I first ran for school board that "a school board's greatest responsibility is to set objectives with measurable targets for the District based on input from all community stakeholders." We have done that again in adopting our most recent set of goals. The other principals of board governance I outlined then have not changed significantly. The board also hires the superintendent and delegates to him the responsibility for achieving those objectives by working with his administrators. The superintendent is accountable to the board and must follow a plan for measuring progress towards board-defined objectives. The board must evaluate the performance of the superintendent based on progress towards those objectives (a requirement under state law for a multi-year performance based contract such as Dr. Witherspoon's). The board itself is ultimately accountable to the community. My understanding of board governance is drawn from the Illinois School Code and guidance from the Illinois Association of School Boards.

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. First, under my leadership as Board President we adopted a joint board goal with District 65 on literacy—a first for our Districts. Both Districts committed significant effort and resources to developing the goal. Since it was adopted we have partnered with Northwestern University, and obtained grant funds to do more work to establish measures to track progress under the goal. In addition, our work with District 65 has been further strengthened by more open meetings of the joint board committee, twice yearly joint board meetings, and a joint achievement report. And newly adopted improvements to sophomore year humanities, including a more writing rich curriculum will help our students make the transition from freshman year to more advanced honors and AP classes with better preparation and ultimately greater success consistent with our work to increase access and success in those classes Second, just last week the Board adopted a safe haven resolution at the urging of one of our students. In an example of Board responsiveness to the community we came together quickly, and with important pro bono assistance from a Board member’s law firm, with a resolution that then served as a model for a similar resolution adopted by District 65. On the heels of Dr. Witherspoon’s post-election statement reminding our community that ETHS welcomes all, this resolution is a strong statement.

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? I can best contribute to student achievement by adopting measure that will help us monitor progress towards our joint District goal and District goals. In addition to our first-ever joint Board goal on literacy, ETHS has two goals that relate closely to student achievement (the fiscal accountability goal and the community outreach and partnership goals relate to achievement as well, but in more indirect ways). Goal 1 addresses equitable and excellent education and calls out race, as well as income, disability, and language status. Goal 2 relates to student well-being, which impacts achievement as well for obvious reasons. I will advocate for adoption of measures of progress towards all these goals, which are still in development as I complete this questionnaire. Part of student success at a big school like ETHS is recognizing each of our students as individuals. Our new Individualized Career and Academic Plans or ICAPs, help to make this possible, whether the student is at the top or bottom quartile. Similarly, programs like Wildkit Academy are open to all students. Other supports are available to striving students, who will be a particular focus going forward because we know that students who do not arrive at ETHS reading at grade level graduate in far lower numbers than those who already read at grade level (99% of whom graduate). For students already achieving at high levels we have an enormous range of honors, AP and other challenging classes for students, including astrophysics. Our social consciousness series, supported by the Board, validates our students’ varied identities and empowers them to succeed.

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

Testing will continue to occur at ETHS, in part due to federal and state requirements related to the new Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA), though the details of how the state will implement that law are still developing. Over the last couple of years there has been disagreement and confusion in Illinois about what test will be used to assess student progress at the high school level. Like many high schools, ETHS objected to the use of PARCC (but was still required to administer it) because it did not offer a benefit to students or the school. Significantly, PARCC is not a test that colleges use for admissions purposes like the ACT or SAT, but it had other shortcomings as well making it difficult to use to assess students growth. Illinois will now be using the SAT going forward, though the ACT will still be available. In addition, AP testing will continue at ETHS (ETHS was a pilot school for AP exams). Additional testing occurs to assess students not yet reading at grade level so that we can be responsive in our teaching to the needs of the students. We continue to attempt to coordinate our testing in ways that helps to minimize the burden to students while also giving our staff the information they need to help our students succeed. Finally, it will be important to our Evanston students to use testing to assess progress of students on the K to 12 continuum, without overtesting or teaching to the test.

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?

I said 4 years ago that “the vision must value parents by affirmatively seeking their input in setting objectives and in evaluating progress towards those objectives.” I urged surveys and a more systemic approach to opening up the school to parents/guardians, as well as improved communication. Since then, we have involved the community in both revisions of the goals that have occurred during my time on the Board. We have also surveyed parents and supported parent/guardian and student groups, including affinity groups supporting the range of student identities. Our communications department conducted a broad audit of our communications and found strength in many areas, including much of our expanded one way communication (a new app, other social media, school tours, and student and parent ambassador programs) but some weaknesses in areas like communication with staff remain. We need to continue to find ways to open up the two way communication between the Board and the community in ways that do not violate the Open Meetings Act (which prohibits more than 3 Board members from discussing Board business unless the meeting is properly noticed and open to the public). Cradle to Career welcomes individual partners but it is more about aligning the work of the not for profits across Evanston with a common goal (literacy) and a set of metrics agreed upon by the partners. It gives structure to the work already underway in Evanston so that we can make more transparent progress towards our common goal and avoid duplication of services.

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

In recent years both Districts have increasingly treated our students’ time in school as a continuum, rather than separate experiences in two school Districts. My vision is that this

approach, combined with all our other work, will eliminate differences in achievement across lines of race, income, disability, and language. Our first step towards this result has been work under my leadership as Board President to develop our first ever joint board goal on literacy that will help direct the joint work of the Districts. The joint achievement report has also helped to focus efforts and with new support from grants, development of measures to gauge progress under the goal will soon be developed. The joint board committee now meets regularly in public session to discuss other ways the Districts can collaborate and our now twice yearly joint Board meetings offer an opportunity to share information more transparently about our work. Those meetings have evolved from side by side reports by each District to true joint reports on our shared work.

Part V - Budget

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

ETHS is fortunate to have a balanced budget for the 7th straight year in a row, and it can also boast a Aaa bond rating since 2008. A low borrowing rate, Foundation fundraising, and corporate partnerships have enabled important capital work, including the new signage project, Heritage Hall, Lobby, and Central Library improvements, Advanced Manufacturing Lab opening, and tennis court and Planetarium upgrades. Despite ETHS' strong financial position, State dysfunction threatens ETHS in 3 ways: A shift of normal pension costs to ETHS could add \$2 million per year to our expenses; school funding reform proposals intended to address inequitable state education funding could eliminate \$2 million in State aid; and a property tax freeze (on top of existing tax caps) could impede our ability to cover pension costs and/or loss of state funds. Through my leadership role in ED-RED, our school advocacy organization, I will continue to support Evanston school interests on these issues. Our joint work with District 65 already allows us to realize some efficiencies in our work on the joint goal and joint achievement report, where we have secured invaluable assistance from Northwestern, which has in turn helped to secure grant funding and local philanthropic support for that effort. Our more active joint board committee continues to examine other areas where we can realize savings that benefit our students.

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

Under the values based budgeting that ETHS uses, we have been successful at keeping reductions out of the classroom, and I would urge that same approach going forward. Expenses in many areas continue to rise, especially in the area of health care. ETHS also saw an increase in purchased services (energy costs, for example) and is making a concerted effort to lower those expenses. Supplies and material expenses were down over 5% from the previous year, in another area where we can realize savings outside the classroom.