

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: Lindsay M. Cohen
Address: 2417 Thayer Evanston, IL 60201
Telephone(s): 847-722-3619
E-mail(s): Lindsay.cohen@gmail.com
Website: www.lindsay4d65.com
Facebook, Twitter, etc.: facebook.com/lindsay4d65

Occupation: Entrepreneur
Educational Background: BS in Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences and Economics from Northwestern, MBA from Booth School of Business University of Chicago
Volunteer or Community Activities: _____

Other Experience: I started my career as an actuarial analyst at a pension consulting firm. I went on to start and sell 2 startups, most recently an educational technology company that I sold to The Princeton Review. I am currently the CMO of a startup founded by 1 of my MMSS classmates from NU.

Do you have children? Yes No

What school(s) do (did) they attend? Kingsley

How long have you lived in Evanston/Skokie? In all, 10 years so far

Part II - Platform

1. What motivated you to run for school board this year?
The ongoing financial challenges at the school district and the worrisome abandonment of public education by the state and federal governments motivated me from a macro perspective to run for the school board. I was also motivated to run by the jarring report on achievement that was shared last November and by the ongoing trend of declining test scores across the board for all District 65 students.
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.)
I am deeply analytical and possess a solid understanding of finance, I am also knowledgeable on defined benefit pension plans. I think this background will be of particular use given that Mr. Rykhus has resigned and Ms. Quattrocki is not seeking reelection. Not only will these skills be useful in looking into matters of the district budget, but they will be put to good use when evaluating our programs, and ensuring the district is performing up to our standards. I have had significant experience negotiating contracts, and combined with my analytic aptitude feel like I would be an asset in incredibly

important decisions for the district. Since 2004 I have worked in the internet industry. I have an understanding of the jobs of the near future, the skills that are necessary for them, and I myself am able to get around pretty well with technology, particularly when it comes to communication. But above all else, I'm an entrepreneur. I don't see problems, I see opportunities and I look for creative solutions – ones that aren't defined by "because this is the way things are done". And while I may be incredibly data driven, I am also highly sensitive and empathetic. I am a tremendous listener and I am never too proud of an idea or thought of my own to not be persuaded otherwise when it's appropriate.

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

In no particular order:

Fixing the achievement gap.

Creating long-term financial sustainability.

Increasing access to technology education.

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 school board's responsibility to the community is to ensure that the district is spending their tax dollars efficiently and that the schools maintain their high standards for the sake of the community as a whole. The board also has a responsible to engage with the community to ensure all voices are heard and represented before making important decisions which impact their constituents. The board is also responsible for being well educated on each decision they make, and be thorough and thoughtful with each vote.

The board has the responsibility of empathy when it comes to parents. Parents of children in the district have more on the line than other community members, and the board needs to honor that distinction. When people are concerned their schools aren't working for their kids or that services that are important to them are going to be cut, the board is responsible for addressing the emotion that comes with that information in an empathetic manner.

Voters should be able to easily assess the effectiveness of the board and its individual members by being easily able to see what the board is setting out to do and what progress is being made on those objectives. Each board member should provide a somewhat regular update on what he/she has accomplished so that his/her contributions can be clearly discerned.

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 have great teachers and administrators. We can build on that by doing more to elevate their experiences to make them more likely to stay at the district and by continuing to hire only the best people for the job. We can help elevate the experiences of teachers by providing them with additional opportunities based on their individual desires. We could also improve recognition of positive contributions by our teaching and administrative staff.

I also believe that the district, especially for being how large it is, is able and willing to engage with the community. They are responsive and collaborative. This is a huge strength given the active, engaged community we live in. We should build on this by expanding our relationship with Northwestern University. The opportunity a strong partnership with them would provide would be limitless. We could partner with them on food service, or look to their students as a source of strong role models for students of color, not to mention the obvious curriculum and educational opportunities they could provide.

And I also believe that another strength of the district lies in its commitment to educate students who are the most vulnerable, primarily those at Park School and Rice Education Center. We could build on this by better highlighting these programs and making them more central to the D65 community. Better highlighting these programs would enable them to raise funds if the district does not have additional budget to contribute.

The 3 major weaknesses of the district that I see are that it's not financially sustainable, we have a massive achievement disparity amongst racial groups, and that we are lagging in STEM education, particularly technology.

We need to look at our finances in a different light. We need to be looking for a way where we are never again in a position where the costs are going to be increasing at such a higher rate than our revenue. What does the model have to look like?

We need to be doing more to address the achievement gap. I think the district has done a lot to look under the hood to try to assess the damage and see what's going on, but I think we need to start making bigger moves and getting more groups outside of Evanston involved. We should be looking at this as a massive opportunity to try to help achievement gaps across the country. This problem is not unique to Evanston, we shouldn't be trying to solve it alone. But more concretely, I think we need more reading specialists and we need to invest more in early education.

And lastly, we need to be providing more technology education. I was learning more programming in 1985 than my second grader is today. Using ipads in the classroom is not a replacement for teaching kids how to code. The appointment of a STEM coordinator is a good first step, but we need to move quickly on this. Equity will only suffer if we don't, because affluent parents are already sending their kids off campus to get these incredibly valuable skills.

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

I am not shy to say that I still have a lot to learn. I could probably write that for any questions here, but I can assure you that I am a quick study. The role of the board is to set the direction of the district through policy and to hold the administration accountable for achieving that vision. The superintendent is responsible for serving as the CEO of the district to ensure the board's vision is implemented.

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 disagree with the way the school board handled the communications surrounding teacher negotiations. I felt like the board stayed relatively quiet while the DEC was loudly and at times unfairly presenting the situation to the public, placing DEC in a position where they controlled the narrative. I believe this decision cost the board unnecessary political capital.

I agree with the decision of the board to move forward with a joint literacy goal in conjunction with District 202. I believe all of our student performance goals must flow from the top. District 65 needs to produce students who are prepared for high school, and joint goals mean that we are all marching to the same beat.

Separately, I believe we need to significantly improve the communications of the board. I should be able to do research easily on the board website to see exactly what decisions have been made without having to wade through a dense series of pdfs and slide presentations.

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 will contribute toward enhancing student achievement by trying to enrich their education through a stronger partnership with Northwestern, through supporting STEM education efforts, and through improving the financial health of the district.

I believe the district needs to focus most heavily on the bottom quartile of students as early as possible by intervening and providing supports as early as possible. For students who have issues that are negatively impacting their performance in the classroom but are not school related, additional community support should be engaged. The needs of the students in the top quartile need to be addressed as well. Students who are progressing more quickly than their peers should be able to advance in the content they are being offered whenever possible. At the very least, independent learning opportunities should be made available to our highest achievers to help them make the most of the hours they are at school.

The district needs to address and not just assess achievement disparities by group. We need to ensure racism and bias is wiped out of the district, immediately. We need to ensure there are positive role models available to our students of color, because representation matters. We also need to end behaviors that lead to unintentional segregation. I believe we also need to completely assess our TWI program. Are we failing our native Spanish speaking students by delaying their ability to master English for the sake of providing a bi-lingual education to a small population of our native English speaking students? Outside of those two obvious distinctions, I don't feel that we benefit

much by distinguishing our students who need help in reaching their full potential by demographics. Instead we should address their lagging achievement by the reason for the lag, so that we can actually implement measures to assist in improving their outcomes.

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

We need to do as little standardized testing as humanly possible. We simply do not have the time and nor should we be spending the money on standardized testing unless it's absolutely necessary. I completely believe that standardized tests are only really great at measuring how good a student is at taking that particular standardized test. Ideally, I would look to find alternative ways, especially given the diversity of our district, to assess students, teachers, and instructional methods.

I believe that standardized testing should never be used rigorously. For instance, the test should not firmly determine which students should be placed in accelerated math. I believe outcomes are a much better measure for students, teachers, and instructional methods, and are much more aligned with what we're actually trying to accomplish in educating 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?

I am interested in exploring additional inter-school relationships across administrators, teachers, and families. For the families, we will all end up at the high school together, so building relationships as early as possible will help our children be more successful. I also believe there should be a joint PTA fundraising effort to help more equitably distribute resources to the schools in the district, centralizing a part of this could be more efficient with people's time as well. My vision outlined is additive to what is already being done with Cradle to Career and other community partnerships.

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

I believe that District 65 and District 202 should be as closely partnered as possible, without being merged. Setting common goals and back office collaboration are most important. Common goals should help more District 65 students be better prepared for high school, which is one of the main goals of the district. And back office collaboration will help us find efficiencies both from a cost and time perspective.

Part V - Budget

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

I intend to push back heavily on proposed budgets to influence fiscal efficiencies. I will look for creative, less expensive solutions for services that the district is currently utilizing in the back office and potentially for testing and curriculum. I would also like to push the district to think outside the box, not only on a line by line basis, but holistically. I like to

refer to this as the “There is No Spoon” philosophy. I would want to look at the scenario of building our district from scratch, based on our collective vision as a community, what would that entail. We would determine how we can iteratively move in that direction, and calculate what the finances are associated with doing that.

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

Priority needs to remain, as it has in the past years, with safety and the classroom. We need to ensure that our buildings are safe for our students and staff, because even the best teachers’ impact is worthless if she and the children she is educating are not safe. Teaching staff and curriculum need to always be prioritized over supplemental equipment and administration in order to maintain educational outcomes.