

Front Page News

10 candidates pursuing 4 seats up for election on Grants Pass School Board

By Chris Bristol of the Daily Courier

Since ballots for the May 16 special election went out in the mail last week, it has become more obvious what is driving some of the 10 candidates for Grants Pass School Board.

Over the weekend, a campaign mailer for three of four "Vote Conservative" candidates running virtually as a ticket for the Josephine County Republican Party lent their names to a hard-hitting campaign mailer warning about "gender fluidity" and the need for a focus on the basics of education and "transparency with parents."

The same conversation is being had nationally: How much say should parents have in the public education system, particularly when it comes to topics now rolled into the rubric of culture wars.

"The last line of defense is local school boards," the mailer warned.

Grants Pass is no stranger to the conversation, having had to tackle it in the form of a gender identity controversy two years ago, when two educators at North Middle School launched a social media campaign called "I Resolve" that advocated for limits on the rights of transgender students.

Here, then, are the candidates for the Grants Pass School Board, based on responses to questionnaires from the Daily Courier. There are four open seats. All 10 candidates participated.

Position 1

The only incumbent in the entire election for school board, Scott Nelson is a local surgeon and father of seven who was elected to the board in 2019 and is now seeking a second four-year term. All of his children are in or went to District 7 schools.

As chairman in 2021, Nelson, 49, voted with the majority in accepting the superintendent's recommendation to terminate the two educators responsible for the "I Resolve" campaign for the misuse of school resources and causing a disruption. He was in the minority when the board later reversed itself and reinstated the pair. A federal judge has since tossed out a lawsuit by the educators, who are appealing.

On a different note, Nelson was still board president last year when Grants Pass High School's graduation rate jumped from 78% to 85%, the highest it's been in years.

He said he strongly believes in education, especially public education, and that controversial topics like sexuality, race and gender are unavoidable ones in the schools.

"These subjects are best taught at home," he said. "However, education is to provide critical thinking skills for individuals. ... Pretending that discussion of controversial topics in schools will malign our students or corrupt them is incorrect.

"Learning to see life through another perspective helps teach understanding, allows one to apply grace and empathy, and makes this world a kinder place."

His opponent, Dustin Smith, does not exactly see it that way.

Smith, 46, is a father of two who describes himself as a "full time Dad, part time Director of Facility Development at River Valley Church," and said his career before coming to Grants Pass included working as a project executive for a leading design-build firm in California for 20 years.

One of the four candidates being backed for the school board by the Josephine County Republican Party, Smith said his goal is to listen to parents, support teachers and place



the focus "on learning, not politics."

A former president of the PTA at Redwood Elementary School, his children now go to New Hope Christian School.

"We hear a lot in the news about schools 'indoctrinating' our children," he said. "My concern is that parents have the right to know what is being taught in the classrooms, and that identity politics is kicked out of our schools."

Position 2

Three candidates are vying to replace Cliff Kuhlman, who found himself unhappily caught in the middle of the "I Resolve" controversy two years ago and is stepping down after serving on the school board since 1986.

Alphabetically, the contenders are Chad Dybdahl, a physical therapist; Greg Fishwick, a longtime civic leader and retired education administrator; and Drew Rees, director of facilities at Dutch Bros Coffee.

Dybdahl, 40, is running for the nonpartisan position as the candidate endorsed by the Josephine County Republican Party. A father of three school-age children, Dybdahl said he and his wife pulled two of their kids from District 7 schools in order to homeschool them and prevent learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic quarantines.

He said he wants to increase career and technical training at the high school level, wants to make curriculum more transparent, and is determined to "keep Critical Race Theory and other similar ideologies out of District 7."

"Sexuality, race, gender and other sociopolitical issues are best addressed in the home with parents and not in schools," he said. "Focusing on these issues tends to be divisive and only polarizes our schools."

The other two candidates for Position 2 are less outspoken, starting with Fishwick, a now-retired career educator who rose to become a dean at Umpqua Community College.

A well-known civic leader and Rotarian who currently serves as president of the Four Way Community Foundation, this would be Fishwick's second stint on the board if elected, having served from 2002 to 2008. He was board chair from 2004-05, and also has sat for years on the budget committees for District 7 as well as the city of Grants Pass.

Citing an endorsement by the Grants Pass Education Association Political Action Committee, Fishwick said his deep experience is critical when the district is trying to recover from enrollment losses during the pandemic.

He noted that when it comes to parents' rights, District 7 has long had opt-out policies, has allowed parents to exclude their children from using instructional materials they have examined and object to, and the use of site councils made up of parents, teachers and administrators that help evaluate and make recommendations about curriculum.

Hot-button topics like sexuality, race and gender, he said, "are part of students' and society's reality. They should be — and are — covered in an age-appropriate, factual manner."

Rounding out the pack is Drew Rees, director of facilities at Dutch Bros Coffee and the father of a student at North Middle School.

A veteran as well as a college graduate who has made a career in facilities management, the 54-year-old Rees said he would like to see more students going into skilled trades and to reverse learning loss from the pandemic.

He said he is "more concerned about people that want to restrict access to books" than transparency over access, and that controversial topics like sexuality, race and politics are not taboo so long as they are taught "in an age-appropriate manner."

"As parents, we have discussed these topics as a family," he said, "and the schools provide supplemental educational support."

Position 6

Joining Smith and Dybdahl on the Josephine County Republican Party's de facto ticket is Nathan Seable, a state parks administrator best known for nearly defeating Herman Baertschiger Jr. in a race for county commissioner three years ago.

Seable, 46, said he favors "non politicized" curriculum, transparency and "parental awareness," more investment in technical skills, "entrepreneurialism" and apprenticeships, and further investment in the facilities.

A father of four, the two eldest being District 7 graduates, he said his third child is enrolled in the online GPFlex program and his fourth is being home-schooled.

"Children are best off if schools focus on things that promote common humanity and universally shared values such as respect, kindness, free speech, and tolerance of others' opinions," he said.

His opponent, Juliet Long, is one of two candidates for the board who grew up in Grants Pass and is a 1989 graduate of Grants Pass High School.

Now a vice president at Rogue Community College, where she rose through the ranks to become dean of science and technology, Long has been on the district's budget committee since 2017 and believes that budget stabilization is a bigger problem than the other candidates realize.

A mother of three District 7 graduates, two of whom have chosen education as a career path, the 52-year-old Long was on the same page as Seable about career and technical training but was not as worried as he is about the topics that animate the culture wars.

"We live in complex times with complex issues and this is certainly one where there are differing opinions," she said. "As a board member, I have the responsibility to represent the community I serve and my position would be to listen and learn and make decisions that best support all students."

Position 7

This position, like Position 2, features three contenders and no incumbent. They are, in alphabetical order, Kari Bassett, Frank Boothby and Joe Schmidt.

A supervisor at the Oregon Department of Human Services Bassett has served with Long on the district's budget committee since 2019 and also is on the district strategic planning committee.

Bassett, 45, is making her second run at the board in recent years, and is the mother of two school-age children — one a freshman at GPHS, the other a sixth grader at South Middle School.

She said that while she believes the district does a good job running curriculum past parent advisory committees, she believes there has been a "shift in practice leaving parents out of what is happening" with students at school.

"I feel that schools covering topics of sexuality, race and gender in a health or science class is important if the subject matter is appropriate for the age of the child it is being presented to," she said.

"That said, I believe that the curriculum taught must be made available to parents to view before presentation should they choose to."

Boothby, the second of three candidates for Position 7, is a program manager at Project Youth+, the nonprofit organization formerly known as College Dreams, and current president of the Grants Pass Kiwanis Club.

The father of two adult children, one of whom graduated from GPHS in 2018, the 51-year-old Boothby said he believes parents should have input tempered by perspective gained from attending PTA meetings and volunteering at school functions.

"Those are the parents the district needs to listen to, not to those who are the loudest or who repeat disinformation from the television," he said.

He said he strongly supports open libraries and that schools should be welcoming to "ALL of our children."

"We should certainly not deny them the ability to go to the bathroom or learn about the history of our country, or limit what they can read in the library," he said.

Joe Schmidt, the third candidate for the position, is a retired educator who worked for years as an administrator for private college-prep schools in Hawaii, South Carolina and Tennessee.

He said it is a fact that the quality of education in the United States has "fallen significantly on the world stage and Oregon, as a state, is rated close to the bottom," and that he believes his experience "can assist District 7 in its efforts to overcome these trends."

The fourth candidate backed by the local Republican Party, he said he is concerned about transparency over books and curriculum but is also "very suspicious of any

organization that wishes to restrict information including reading materials, curriculum and program."

"I do not believe that it is the school's responsibility to promote life-styles, and teachers should not be classroom activists, but they should focus on teaching and promoting critical thinking skills, thus enabling students to become informed, and self-sufficient, and independent," he said.

Reach city editor Chris Bristol at 541-474-3716 or cbristol@thedailycourier.com.
