

Tired of Uninformed School Board Candidates? Try Asking These Questions



The other day, I was reading a WBUR (Boston’s NPR station) article titled [“Why School Boards Are](#)

[the NEXUS of America’s Culture Wars](#)

.” The reason I was reading the article is that the superintendents, school leaders, and teachers that I work with report having seen an increase in divisive language being used by school board candidates within their district. In the United States, we have never really seen a time when the curriculum being taught in school and the talk of agenda pushing have been so popular. Schools have always had some level of politics at play in decisionmaking and what is being taught in classrooms, but the national political influence has been minimal...until now.

In fact, I recently saw a Facebook post by a teacher and parent from a suburban district that focused on this very issue. The post focused on a school board candidate’s election flyer, which you can see below, and how the candidate’s announcement is riddled with the kind of fear mongering we see from potential school board candidates around the country who are clearly uninformed about what is

actually being taught in schools but have a propensity to get other uninformed parents riled up through the clearly biased and incorrect language they use.

I feel most passionate about the following:

- Individual Freedom:** Our great Nation's backbone is built on the bold notion that our individual, God-given liberties should never be infringed upon and preserved against government intrusion. This does not exempt the school setting and that of our most vulnerable.
- Parental Rights within the School System:** Parents choose what is best for their children, not the state, not the federal government, not the school. The current push for vaccine mandates with school nurses distributing them is an appalling thought. Discrimination against a vaccination status and segregating against our children is harmful and unacceptable.
- Academics:** We need to return to merit based and core academics, not Critical Race Theory and Social Emotional Learning courses. This type of ideology has no place in our school system. This is an overreach to a bigger agenda, and we need to stop it now. Parents need to be parents and Teachers need to be Teachers, teaching Academics only.
- Return to Normalcy:** We faced the pandemic head on and have come out of it. Now let's get back to the way we were. Our children have been the ones to carry the biggest burden at the most vulnerable time of their lives. We need to restore their confidence, never allowing mask mandates. We must provide our children freedom to grow and gain the confidence they need to become the leaders of our community. We need to get back to the basics and allow our children to be children again.
- Fiscal Responsibility:** We must be mindful of frivolous spending and the unnecessary tax burden it passes on to our community. The school board must evaluate the need over the want, understanding tax dollars are a sacrifice for our residents, not a bottomless slush fund.

I will not stand idly by while they roll out the carpet for a greater agenda. We need to get back to the basics and stand firm on what this great country was built on. Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Thank you for your support. I look forward to serving my community on the Board of Education.

The language in the above announcement is in line with candidates for local and state political positions who use the same fear mongering to try to sway people to vote for them. They scream about “Firing those in charge” or “Finally giving parents a voice in their child’s education,” but they have probably never spent quality time in a classroom, nor have they attended PTA meetings or open houses. These sentiments are all about taking back control of education and government. The problem is, when those fear mongers talk about getting back control, what that really means is they only want their ideas and values at the forefront of what is being taught in school and to ban all other conversations. If you do not agree with them, then you are somehow a traitor to your country.

It’s not that any of these tactics are new, but what we are beginning to see are people who no longer fall for these types of unhealthy tactics. People are tired of the nasty polarizing language from both sides of the aisle, but they are unsure about what questions to ask these candidates. I believe most people want school board candidates who will unify them rather than tear their school community apart a bit more. More than that, communities need board members who will be informed about what teaching and learning is really all about.

Let’s Break the Announcement Down a Bit More

In order to help unify the real caregivers for public education, I’d like to break down a few of the bullet points in the announcement because although this candidate may not be from your community, the same language is being used throughout the country. It’s important to break down the bulleted points and then craft some questions to ask these candidates. I do not care what your political affiliation is; what I care about is what you will do to make sure that every student is engaged in learning within the school system. Additionally, I care about the fact that no matter where you are in the country, you need board members who will support teaching and learning. It is already hard enough for teachers and leaders; they do not need a board member who will only polarize the school community.

So, that being said, let’s break down a few of the points. For example:

Individual freedom—What those who use that term really mean is that they don’t care about everyone’s freedom, just their own. Those who are easily persuaded and quick to knee-jerk reactions

will always feel that their rights are being infringed upon, so their go-to solution is to ban the conversation instead. They throw in “God-given” for good measure.

Parental rights within the school system—Parents have always had a right in their child’s education through a variety of avenues such as:

- Parents can attend parent-teacher conferences.
- They can vote in school board elections.
- They can take part in the PTA.
- Parents can support their child at home through valuing education and promoting the idea of talking with others who have different ways of thinking.
- School boards have policies that give parents the right to question curriculum.

What people who say “parents need to have a voice in their child’s education” are forgetting is that the very topic they may not want their child exposed to may, in fact, be the very topic another parent does want their child exposed to. So by standing on their soapbox saying they want to be able to control what children in their school community learn, they are trying to deny other parents that very “freedom.” In an effort to help navigate this often critical issue, schools do afford a parent the right to have their child pulled out of their classroom when topics are discussed that make those parents uncomfortable. However, and this is important here, in public education, there are academic standards that must be taught, and teachers are the experts in understanding and teaching those standards.

Academics—This one is the hot topic these days. Want to upset parents? All you have to do when running for any office is mention critical race theory, and parents and uninformed adults go running and screaming. For more information on critical race theory, please [check out this explainer](#)

or watch this episode of [A Seat at the Table](#)

, where we focus on CRT. Just to be clear, CRT is not taught in any K-12 public school, though that issue is currently being debated and not just by those on the right.

When it comes to social-emotional learning, I believe people fail to understand how important it is to the development of children as engaged learners. [According to the CDC](#)

(yes, I know that people using these scare tactics probably don't trust the CDC because Qanon is a much better source for them), "1 in 3 high school students have experienced persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, and 1 in 6 have considered suicide."

What the anti-SEL crew do not seem to grasp is that without social-emotional learning, students will not be able to focus on academics. In fact, Fredricks et al. (2004) found that there are three types of engagement, which are:

- Behavioral Engagement—Involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out.
- Emotional Engagement—Encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school.
- Cognitive Engagement—Drawing on the idea of investment, it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills.

So, the reality is that academic learning is actually comprised of the whole body, which includes emotional and behavioral engagement.

Greater Agenda? We all want a return to normalcy and fiscal responsibility, but focusing on words like "a greater agenda" has me wondering what that exactly means. So, in an effort to help communities decide who the best board candidates are for their school communities, I believe it is the time to ask these candidates a number of questions. You see, the real issue is that we allow candidates to fear monger without holding them responsible. These candidates deserve to have a voice in their community, but when they use divisive language, it is our responsibility as a community to dive down deeper to understand the knowledge base of the candidates.

Questions for Board Candidates

Some questions I would ask are:

- How familiar are you with the curriculum being taught in our school district?
- When you mention critical race theory, what does CRT actually mean, and can you provide details and examples of how it is being taught in our schools?
- What is your understanding of social-emotional learning? How do you think it is being taught in schools? Many students experience trauma, and I wonder what your suggestions are when it comes to helping these students through their trauma? You see, many teachers would love to have every student come in physically and mentally healthy, fed and loved, but unfortunately that is not always the case. They need our assistance, and their families need our partnership, not our scorn.
- You mention the greater agenda? What is that greater agenda, and how is it different from the agenda you are trying to push? By saying a greater agenda, you seem to be alluding to the fact that you are OK with a mediocre agenda? Why wouldn't schools want a greater agenda? After all, there was a former president who coined the phrase Make America Great Again? Isn't that a greater agenda?

- You mention life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? That's great, but isn't happiness more of a social-emotional value? Applying those values contradicts what's been said about keeping SEL out of schools.

In the End

You know what we really need in the public school system? Less fear mongering pushed by uninformed adults and more informed decisionmaking, in which, instead of banning books and ideas, we are engaged in respectful debate in classrooms that help students actually think for themselves. By banning conversations and books, we are not providing a pathway to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; we are extinguishing it because the board candidates who use these phrases clearly do not trust that students can learn to think for themselves.

Public education is just that...public. Public education is supposed to be open to all types of students and a multitude of diverse ideas, a place where we can learn from one another. I for one love engaging in discussions with people who think differently from me because I learn. If that's the greater agenda, then sign me up!

We also need to keep in mind that school board elections and school budget votes are two venues where we, as taxpayers, can actually have a direct impact on how our schools function. We should not so easily give the power away to people just because they scare us into doing so. We should give them the power because they are highly informed and will help our school communities become stronger.

And teachers and school leaders need less of these unnecessary distractions created by people who know nothing about what actually happens in schools. In fact, a board candidate's announcement like the one above is a slap in the face to the hard work that teachers and leaders engage in day in and day out.