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**DPI candidates call for more equality across school system**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Wisconsin state schools superintendent candidates are arguing for a more equitable school system, more funding and less focus on standardized testing. But the seven candidates vying for the state’s top education job differ on how to achieve those goals.

The candidates first face off in a Feb. 16 primary. The top two then go on to the April 6 general election. The winner will succeed Carolyn Stanford Taylor, who passed on running for the office to which she was appointed by Gov. Tony Evers, who before he was elected governor led the Department of Public Instruction.

At the first virtual state superintendent candidate forum, held Jan. 7 by the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, the candidates agreed two keys to getting schools back on track were focusing more classroom time on learning subjects rather than test-taking and working toward providing all students the resources they need.

But Shandowlyon Hendricks-Williams, who held administrative positions in public and private charter schools in Milwaukee from 2006-2014, said she supports parents’ right to choose “high-performance” schools for their kids. She was the only candidate who did not answer “no” when asked if she supported charter schools.

All but two candidates, Hendricks-Williams and former Brown Deer School District Superintendent Deborah Kerr, said they oppose private school voucher programs. Kerr said she supports “one system of accountability.” Hendricks-Williams said she supports “great schools.”

Hendricks-Williams, the only Black candidate, plans if elected to implement a 20-point student “bill of rights” to help improve education quality statewide, decrease learning gaps and make students feel more like they belong in schools.

She also said she wants to increase the diversity of teachers, offer a $350 rebate to parents to help recoup some of their school expenses, and examine “the pipeline between special education and prison.”

Kerr said she wants to work closely with DPI employees and the state Legislature to better understand how to create a high-quality education system for Wisconsin.

“As I indicated in my first 100-day plan, I’d be meeting with legislators to help us work together to create a vision of a world-class education system for all students in Wisconsin,” she said.

She added that her experience improving students’ reading levels at Brown Deer schools and working with other administrators in the district make her a good fit for the job.

Sheila Briggs, current assistant state superintendent, said she will focus on continuing to work toward getting a budget passed that helps create a fair school system for students.

“It will be so important that we do not let the cost of this pandemic be balanced on the backs of our teachers or our kids,” Briggs said.

Joe Fenrick, a science teacher at Fond du Lac High School, geology lecturer at UW-Oshkosh and a member of the Fond du Lac County Board, said kids also need less stress to improve the learning environment in schools. He wants to focus primarily on reducing time spent on standardized testing for kids.

“That’s my number one point is that there’s too much testing going on,” he said.

While the majority of his experience in education is in the classroom, Fenrick said his time on the county board working with community members and state lawmakers makes him a good fit. He also wants to focus on providing a better learning environment for students with disabilities.

Superintendent of Pecatonica School District Jill Underly said she also plans to achieve more fair schools and special education programs by adding “an equity officer at the cabinet level” and improving early childhood education to get kids up to speed sooner in their lives.

She especially wants to improve early childhood special education programs, “because that’s what sets kids up for a lifetime of success.’’

“If they’re successful and they have mental health support in elementary school, they’re going to graduate from high school,” she said. “And we need to invest in kids younger rather than investing in them later as a society in corrections.”

Steve Krull, principal of Milwaukee Public Schools’ Garland Elementary School, said he wants to first focus on securing funding for schools and creating a budget using the resources available. He also wants to increase the quality of schools by improving teacher training and redistributing funds across the state to create a more evenly funded system so public schools aren’t as dependent on property taxes for funding.

Former West Salem Superintendent Troy Gunderson said he wants to work with DPI to create a plan for a fairer system.

“I think we’re at an inflection point. The pandemic has really laid bare the inequities of our system around race, economics and opportunities,” Gunderson said. “I sincerely believe that we can do better. We have to make a collective commitment to the common good of public education. What happens in Milwaukee has to matter to my friends back in Colfax and vice-versa. This has to be a `we’ issue.”

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