

Cris Carusi
Candidate for Seat 6
MMSD Board of Education

2017 School Board Election Questionnaire

1. Why are you running for the MMSD Board of Education?

I am running for the Madison School Board because I believe that children should receive a quality education in public, neighborhood schools. Strong schools that provide all students with opportunities to excel are our first line of defense against state and national efforts to privatize public education.

I will bring broad, extensive experience in our schools to the Madison school board. My children have attended public schools in the Madison district for almost ten years. During that decade, I've participated in dozens of school board meetings and seen firsthand the important role the Board of Education can play in our community by making key decisions affecting our schools. I've collaborated with parents and educators throughout the city and listened to their thoughts, ideas and concerns about our schools. In my professional life, I have done grassroots organizing, led a nonprofit organization, and managed programs and budgets at UW-Madison. I am ready to put this experience to work for our district.

In my many years as a parent in the Madison school district, I've grown to appreciate the central role relationships play in addressing challenges at all levels, ranging from narrowing opportunity gaps, to managing classroom behavior, to respecting and supporting our educators. One critically important role of school board members is to listen to the community members, students, teachers and families they represent, in order to make the best decisions about how we run our schools, and spend our tax dollars. As a school board member, I will make every effort to foster honest, transparent relationships with people in our schools, and across our community.

2. Name three things you believe the MMSD does well.

- a) Ethnically, culturally and racially diverse schools and classrooms
- b) Excellent educators and staff
- c) Fine arts classes at all grade levels, with a rich variety of electives offered in high school

3. Name three things you believe the MMSD needs to improve.

- 1) Transparent communication and decision-making between the administration, Board of Education, staff, families and the community: Input into district decisions is neither broadly solicited nor genuinely considered before and during decisions about where the district is

headed. Public feedback is filtered through the administration before it gets to the school board. Top-down decision making about plan and policy implementation discounts the experience and voice of educators, whose perspectives are critical for good decision making. Furthermore, the high degree of change in the district is causing initiative fatigue in our schools.

2) Educating all children: Not all children are thriving in Madison's public schools. This is evidenced by our persistent (though slightly improved) achievement gap, higher suspension and expulsion rates for African American students and students with disabilities, and the fact that 10-20 percent of our students do not graduate from high school. Poverty and inequality are part of the problem. The district has elected to close budget holes by increasing class sizes. This makes it much harder for educators and school staff to foster relationships with children, and understand and meet their unique academic, social and emotional needs.

3) Emphasis on standardized testing: In my nearly 10 years as an MMSD parent, the number of standardized tests taken by students has grown exponentially. This has led to changes that are not in the best interest of our children or teachers. Reading and math instruction, while important, are prioritized over the arts, humanities, science and even recess. I am alarmed about the increasing importance of MAP scores in evaluating teacher performance, decisions about classroom placement and advanced learning opportunities, and gauging progress on school improvement.

4. How do you think the MMSD should address these challenges?

1) School staff, families and the community need both voice and influence in district decision making. The Joint MTI/AFSCME/Administrative Committees need to be supported, and monitored to make sure that the employee group representatives have an equal voice. The board must hear directly from these committees. In our schools, I believe that rethinking School Based Leadership Team selection and the School Improvement Plan process could provide staff with a stronger voice in choosing priorities, setting goals and making decisions for our schools. At the school board and administrative level, I will request more public forums and other opportunities, so that staff, families and community members are able to provide direct input to our democratically elected representatives. For the 2015 facilities referendum, the district solicited broad public input and, in response, expanded the scope of its proposal. This referendum passed with an 82 percent majority. The new ad-hoc committee on Educational Resource Officers (EROs) could provide a model for giving staff and community members a meaningful voice in district decisions.

2) As a school board member, I will prioritize smaller class sizes, as this is a proven strategy to close achievement gaps and build positive relationships. I believe that small classes are a better use of district resources than an electronic device for each student. In our high-poverty elementary schools, SAGE class sizes have expanded to 20 or more

children per classroom. Class sizes are even larger at our non-SAGE elementary, middle and high schools, with some high school classes exceeding 35 students. Larger classes increase staff workloads and make it harder for educators to develop relationships with students that can improve behavior and achievement, and foster a love of learning.

3) As a school board member, I will work to reduce the number of standardized tests taken by students, advocate for a well-rounded curriculum, and minimize the importance of these tests in educator evaluations.

5. Name three things you believe the State of Wisconsin could do to better support public schools

a) End privatization of public education: Repeal legislation allowing external chartering agencies, such as the UW System, to divert public school funding into non-instrumentality charter schools, and eliminate voucher programs. In lieu of this, restore all funding diverted to non-instrumentality charter schools and voucher schools from public school funds.

b) Increase state aid to schools by raising per-pupil revenue limits, and by considering poverty as well as property values in equalization aid formulas. The current trend of closing budget gaps with referendums is unsustainable and will aggravate inequities.

c) Repeal Act 10 and restore collective bargaining rights for educators and staff. Unions have historically played an important role in fighting for public education, and that role is threatened under Act 10. Restoring full rights to MTI would go a long way toward ensuring fair compensation and working conditions that would aid in retaining and recruiting good educators.

6. How would you advocate for these needs as a Board member?

I will use my power and voice as a school board member to testify to the state legislature on behalf of public education. I have done this as a parent; in 2011, I testified in opposition to SB22, which would have created a state charter school authorizing board. Additionally, I will support the work of grassroots networks supporting public education, such as Stop Special Needs Vouchers and the Wisconsin Public Education Network, to organize broad action for change.

7. What do you believe are the greatest external challenges facing the MMSD?

a) Intensified efforts to privatize public education through the strategies we've already seen (vouchers, non-instrumentality charters), as well as the possibility of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) that allow parents to take money from their neighborhood schools and use it at any public or private school.

b) Attacks on the teaching profession. These include school reforms that take the joy out of teaching and encourage one-size-fits-all approaches to instruction, cuts to teachers' pay

and benefits, heavy emphasis on standardized test results when evaluating teachers, anti-union legislation, and the continued trend of blaming teachers for broader social issues.
c) Growing inequities in our society that concentrate wealth, increase poverty and widen opportunity gaps.

8. How do you think the MMSD can best meet these challenges?

School reform is becoming normalized across the US and in Madison. As a school board member, I would push back against reforms that encourage privatization, diminish teachers and their profession, standardize classroom instruction and encourage teaching to the test. Children learn in different ways and on unique timelines, and teachers should be trusted to find the best approaches to meet the unique needs of each child. The district should move some Title 1 funding currently spent at the district level into further reducing class sizes at high-poverty schools, to address inequities and reduce opportunity gaps.

9. What are your thoughts about public charter schools governed by the BOE?

While I am open to considering proposals for public (instrumentality) charter schools, I believe that improving our neighborhood schools should be our top priority. Instrumentality charter schools should only be considered if they will provide a service or function that can't be accomplished in neighborhood schools. Staff compensation at instrumentality schools needs be on a par with that of staff in neighborhood schools. Charter schools in our district need to be able to serve all students, including students with disabilities.

10. What are your thoughts about private charter schools governed by others?

I am opposed to charter schools that are not governed by our elected school board (non-instrumentality charters).

11. What are your thoughts about vouchers (using public funds to pay for private schools)?

I am opposed to all three of Wisconsin's Parental Choice Programs (Milwaukee, Racine and Statewide) and the Special Needs Scholarship Program. In the first year of the statewide voucher program, seventy-five percent of applicants were already attending a private school. The Milwaukee voucher program cost taxpayers an estimated \$211 million in 2014-15, and Wisconsin school districts will lose \$2.4 million in state aid this year to fund the special needs voucher program.

12. Non-incumbents only: Have you ever attended a PTO, PTA meeting or a school board meeting? If so, what issues motivated your attendance?

I have attended almost all PTO meetings at my children's elementary and middle schools and served in PTO leadership roles including fundraising, engaging student writers in PTO

school newsletters, and running a healthy snack program. I participate in Westside PTO meetings. I have attended dozens of school board meetings for more than ten years and testified on a variety of programs and issues including: Educator Effectiveness, the technology plan, protecting funding for Ready, Set, Goal conferences and Advanced Learning IRTs, budgets, and the importance of planning time for elementary school teachers. Other issues motivating my attendance at BOE meetings include the Behavior Education Plan, the Pathways Plan, standardized testing, growing class sizes and 4K.

13. Do you believe that teachers and other employees should have a voice in issues that impact...?

Yes

b. Their working conditions

Yes. As AFT President Randi Weingarten says, "A teacher's working conditions are a child's learning conditions."

c. Their students' learning conditions (e.g. class size, use of technology, building conditions)

Yes

d. Curriculum and assessment selection and decisions

Yes

14. Would you support the reinstatement of collective bargaining rights for all public employees (currently prohibited by Act 10)?

Yes (see 5c)

15. School staff experienced a reduction in take-home pay after Act 10 was passed and salary increases have not kept pace with the cost of living. The District is experiencing increasing difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified employees. If elected to the Board of Education, what is your plan to increase pay for school staff?

I would advocate for across the board pay increases at the maximum level allowed under Act 10. I would oppose further cuts to benefits, including TERP and other retirement benefits. I would also oppose performance-based raises, as this works against collaboration. I know that pay increases have not kept up with inflation, and that employees have further suffered financially because of cuts to benefits. I would encourage the board to consider including staff pay increases above the level permitted by Act 10 in a future referendum, in order to help our district attract and retain qualified employees.

Neither my husband nor I are employed by the district, so I will be able to vote on staff compensation.

16. Are you aware of the MMSD's collaborative employee handbook process with employee representatives?

Yes.

a. If so, do you support the continuation of that process?

Yes, as long as it gives employees power in determining their working conditions and compensation. Joint MTI/AFSCME/Administrative Committees like the Joint Committee on Safety should inform and support the process.

17. Do you believe that parents and students should have a voice in issues that impact them?

Yes. As a parent of two students in the MMSD, I strongly believe that families and students should have a voice in issues that impact them, such as class sizes, classroom behavior, technology use at school, and standardized testing. That said, I believe that it is most appropriate for parents to engage in these issues at the policy and program level, in a way that supports educators without micro-managing their efforts.

a. If so, how do you think the MMSD could improve in that area?

The MMSD needs to do a much better job of giving families and students voice and power in decisions about new and existing plans, and budget proposals. The district needs to provide more opportunities for all interested families and students to give direct feedback to the school board and administration as plans are being formulated. Surveys and public forums need to encourage open, honest feedback and constructive criticism.

18. Are you aware of the MMSD's Behavior Education Plan?

Yes. I serve on the MMSD Guiding Coalition on Equitable Behavior and Discipline, and I have children at Jefferson and Memorial.

a. If so, what are your thoughts about the goals of the plan?

I fully support the goals behind the district's shift from an emphasis on exclusionary discipline to supportive and restorative approaches in managing classroom behavior. Reducing suspensions and expulsions, addressing the disproportionately high rates of suspending African American and disabled students, and keeping kids in class as much as possible are central to confronting opportunity gaps, inequality and racism.

b. What are your thoughts about the implementation of the plan?

The implementation of the Behavior Education Plan has been problematic. The plan does not include enough funding for new staff positions at the building level to support restorative justice and classroom management, and to meet the social and emotional needs of struggling students. Since the plan was approved, class sizes have grown at most of our schools, making it even more difficult for teachers to manage their classrooms. Educators need more support from interventionists, social workers and psychologists, especially when students are experiencing trauma. The district needs to continue to work with the MTI Joint Committee on Safety on staff surveys that can inform contract negotiations. Teachers have not been consulted enough.

19. What do you see as the proper relationship between the Board of Education and the MMSD Superintendent and administration?

The Board of Education hires and evaluates the MMSD Superintendent. While the school board and superintendent need to have a good working relationship, the superintendent reports to the board. The administration needs to provide the school board with complete, accurate, and timely information—and opportunities to act on that information— in order for the board to fulfill its oversight role and determine the best path forward.

20. Who do you plan to seek advice from should you be elected to the Board of Education?

1) Past and current Board of Education members: TJ Mertz, Anna Moffitt, Marj Passman and Carol Carstensen

2) School staff: Andy Waity, Cindy Ball, Nancy Curtin (retired sub). I will set a goal of visiting each of the MMSD schools I will be responsible for twice per year. During those visits, I will meet with staff and confidentially listen to their advice, ideas and concerns.

21. Are you seeking MTI's endorsement of your campaign?

Yes. I would be honored to have MTI's endorsement.

22. Are you seeing MTI political action contributions for your campaign?

Yes

23. Is there anything else you would like MTI members to know about your candidacy and why you are seeking election to the Board of Education?

During my ten years as a MMSD parent, I've seen plans and curricula come and go. But one thing hasn't changed, and that is the importance of educators and the supportive relationships they have with students, families and staff in our schools. The MMSD needs to ensure that educators and staff have optimal working conditions to build strong relationships with children and help them reach their fullest potential. By doing this, the

district will attract and retain the best teachers, and give our students the best possible education.

This is a crucial time for public education in our nation, in our state, and in Madison. At each level, I see harmful trends accelerating. I want to serve on the Madison School Board because I believe we need to work locally to push back against privatization and other threats to public education. Strong, healthy neighborhood schools are central to this effort. We must ensure that teachers have the respect, trust and power they need to lead the charge for public education.