

**MTI VOTERS**  
**2017 School Board Election Questionnaire**

**Ed Hughes responses**  
**January 13, 2017**

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

I am concerned that public schools are under attack, both in our state and across the nation. Our best response is the quality of the education we provide. I want to help Madison serve as a model of a thriving urban school district, with great teachers driving sustained academic growth for all our students and accelerated progress on closing our achievement gaps.

We are headed in the right direction. Last year, for example, we saw broad improvement and gap-narrowing progress in the critical measure of third grade reading. But much more remains to be done.

I am running again because the next three years will be critical to our school improvement efforts. I believe my continued service on the Board will help us achieve our ambitious goals for our students and help ensure strong schools for a strong Madison.

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

1. MMSD provides the best education available to students in Dane County. 2. Through referenda and otherwise, MMSD has been able to earn the support of our community, which has situated MMSD in a much better position than many other school districts throughout the state. 3. We have adapted to the post-Act 10 environment about as well as possible, with a reasonable employee handbook and a genuinely collaborative change process.

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

1. We need to narrow our achievement gaps, which is our greatest challenge. 2. Related to No. 1, we need to provide a more engaging and purposeful education to our students in middle and high school. 3. It is not unique to MMSD, but all school districts need to work hard to strike a smart balance between, on the one hand, prescribing a consistent and coherent system-wide approach to instruction that benefits all students and, on the other hand, recognizing the knowledge and commitment of teachers and staff and honoring their values and skills.

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

1. There's no single silver-bullet solution to the gaps in opportunity that lead to disparities in academic outcomes. Instead, our efforts at enhancing the learning of students of color encompass everything we're doing, from 4K through high school, starting with a great teacher in every classroom. For example, we need a strong 4K program, a focus on attendance, intensive attention to reading by third grade, renewed commitment to social and emotional learning in middle school, enhanced family engagement practices, smooth transitions from fifth to sixth grade and from eighth to ninth grade, a minimization of lost class time due to suspensions and expulsions, and high expectations and appropriate levels of challenge for our students in all their classes. These efforts will benefit all students, and particularly those who are currently behind.
2. We are attempting to provide a more engaging and purposeful education to our students in middle school and high school through academic and career planning and through the pathways program. I believe the thinking behind pathways is sound and I support the initiative, but I think we need to move deliberately. We shouldn't start on or select the second pathway until we have a chance to see how the first one works.
3. Striking a reasonable balance between a prescribed, district-wide curriculum and approach to teaching and appropriate recognition of the experience and individual skills of our classroom teachers is an ongoing effort. Open lines of communication and mutual trust and respect are critical.

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

1. Eliminate revenue limits and adequately fund education.
2. Eliminate all voucher programs.
3. Respect local control of our public schools by our locally-elected School Boards.

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

A recent article in the State Journal described me as “a frequent and pointed critic of the state’s funding of public education and of many Republican-led education efforts, such as the expansion of the state’s private-school voucher program.” I will continue my frequent and pointed criticisms when they are warranted.

As an example, in 2015, I spent a lot of time researching revenue limits. In November, 2015, I wrote a blog post that laid out an extensive criticism of revenue limits. The post was described in the WASB Legislative Update a few days later as “a very interesting

and well researched piece.” I was then invited to adapt the blog post for an article in WASB’s School News, which was published in the April, 2016 edition. My work on revenue limits helped lay the groundwork for our successful referendum in November. I will continue to take every opportunity to point out that revenue limits represent very poor public policy.

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

1. Vouchers and other state-funded alternatives to our public schools. 2. Inadequate state funding of schools and overly-restrictive revenue limits. 3. Madison-area families choosing educational options for their children other than our MMSD public schools.

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

Our best response to all three challenges is the quality of the education we provide. We can minimize the adverse impact of vouchers by providing a quality education for our students such that families have no reason to search out alternatives. We can advocate for reasonable funding with the governor and the legislature, but there is little reason to think that they will pay any attention to us. We will have to continue to rely on our supportive local community. If we can demonstrate that we are doing a good job educating our students, our community will continue to support us, as they recently proved by the overwhelming support of our recent referendum. Similarly, we can keep Madison families with educational options invested in our schools, once again, by demonstrating that the education we provide our students better prepares them for college, career and community than any locally-available alternatives. To be persuasive, we will have to do a better job explaining the benefits our students derive from a rigorous education in our diverse schools.

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

I have supported Nuestro Mundo and believe the school is doing well. I recently voted in favor of a three-year renewal of the charter for Badger Rock. The school’s performance has been disappointing but recent positive changes at the school warranted the renewal. I supported the decision of Wright Middle School to shift to a magnet approach, similar to Spring Harbor, and away from a charter.

I will review the pending Isthmus Montessori proposal with a close eye on its likely financial impact on the school district. I am aware that there are a number of popular and successful Montessori charter schools operated by the Milwaukee School District and that the Montessori approach can be effective for some learners.

In general, I think that there can be a useful role for charters that are operated as instrumentalities of the school district. If there are impediments to learning we can't address or opportunities for improvement we can't provide through our neighborhood schools, a charter school could be an effective alternative. That said, I believe we need to maintain our focus on the priorities we have identified in our Strategic Framework and resist the temptation to diffuse our efforts by adopting unrelated new initiatives. This includes diverting excessive time from working to improve all our schools in order to consider charter school proposals or other alternative school models that are not closely aligned with our core instructional priorities.

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

I am against them. I was and remain an outspoken critic of the so-called Office of Educational Opportunity established in the office of the UW President as a means for establishing charter schools in Madison that are not answerable to the school district.

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

I am a firm opponent of vouchers. The fundamental problem with vouchers is that the approach is based on the pernicious premise that K12 education is an individual consumption choice rather than a public good.

I believe that vouchers are promoted by enemies of public education as a way of effecting a fundamental shift in funding K12 education away from a school-based model and toward a student-based model, the "voucher in every backpack" notion. This approach is based on a fundamental mistake that we should treat schools like businesses. Among other shortcomings, this wrongly assumes that parents select schools on the basis of educational quality, ignores the stake we all have in the quality of the education our children receive, demeans the genuine expertise of our teachers, staff and educational professionals, and dangerously threatens the most vital social institutions in our communities.

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

Not applicable.

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

- a. Their pay and benefits**
- b. Their working conditions**

- c. **Their students' learning conditions (e.g. class size, use of technology, building conditions)**
- d. **Curriculum and assessment selection and decisions**

Yes, to all. I certainly take seriously the views of teachers and other employees on all these issues, though the ultimate decisions, invariably affected by budget constraints, remain with the school board.

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

I was opposed to Act 10 and demonstrated along with everyone else during the winter of 2011. Given the political environment, there is virtually no chance that collective bargaining rights will be restored during the next three years. My focus will be on continuing to ensure that our handbook process honors teacher voice and remains a genuinely collaborative process.

**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?**

Insufficient pay for our teachers is not a new problem. In 1857, D.Y. Kilgore, Madison's Superintendent of Schools, wrote: "The compensation at present afforded to the teachers in the intermediary and primary departments is far too small. Some of our teachers have resigned on account of the great disproportion of their salaries to the labor required." It is 160 years later, and the issue remains.

The first step toward adequate compensation for teachers is making sure the school district has sufficient resources overall. I spearheaded the efforts to pass our \$26 million schools referendum in November and worked with the City to free up for school use \$9 million in property tax revenue locked up in Downtown developments in TID 25. As a result, we won't have to lay off teachers or staff or cut pay, no matter how restrictive the approach to school funding in the next state budget.

I think we should collaboratively take a look at the total amount the school district pays in salary and benefits for our teachers and staff and see if there may be better ways to structure our overall compensation, which could lead to higher salaries. I emphasize that this would have to be a collaborative undertaking.

Also, in recent years almost all of our increases in compensation have been devoted to step and lane increases. Maybe this is the best way to handle increases; maybe it isn't. Again, I think it may make sense to have a collaborative discussion about this.

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

Yes, I helped shape the process.

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

Yes. I believe the process has worked well so far. Recently, the Board approved changes to the handbook that were arrived at through the handbook process. One Board member attempted to insert an additional change into the handbook that had not been discussed or proposed by the groups. I opposed this effort. I think it disrespects the process for individual Board members to seek to add new proposals to the changes that have been arrived at collaboratively and I will not propose any such changes.

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

Yes. Parents should be as involved as they can be in their children's education, beginning with reading to them regularly from an early age and continuing through active involvement with their schools.

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

Our schools should view parents as partners in their children's learning and eliminate unnecessary barriers to parental involvement. I think MMSD's Family and Community Engagement standards are a step in the right direction. It is also beneficial when our schools can engage families in other community settings, such as the annual Sennett Family Picnic at Southdale Park. From a family empowerment perspective, I am a fan of the Parent-School Partnership at Nuestro Mundo. This program, created by the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, has the primary goal of providing information about how the educational system in the U.S. is structured, how it differs from Latin America, and how parents can best advocate for their children. I anticipate that our community schools at Mendota and Leopold will be able to do some exciting work in this area.

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

Yes.

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

I support the goals of the plan. The Behavior Education Plan was overdue in terms of bringing our approach to school discipline in line with our approach to positive behavior

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

Perhaps inevitably, implementation challenges varied among our schools. From my perspective, it appeared that the schools that were able to implement the plan most effectively were those for which the BEP did not mark a significant change from the existing approach to school discipline and that had strong leaders. Other schools struggled.

We on the Board tried to be responsive to those struggles and we did authorize additional staff and behavior education specialists as several schools. I also recognize that initially the school district did not do a great job communicating how classroom disruptions were to be handled under the BEP and that there were significant challenges with recording behavior events.

It seems as if we have largely been able to get over the initial implementation problems. I do remain concerned when I hear from teachers and parents about the perception that kids can misbehave without any consequences, and that this increases misbehavior and detracts from the learning environment for all the students in a class.

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

To be successful, a school district needs strong and effective leadership from its superintendent. The Board's job is to hire a skilled superintendent and take all reasonable steps to help her succeed.

Board members set direction, both through our votes on policy matters, through our goal-setting exercises, and through our budget decisions. The superintendent implements the policy the Board has set and the Board must hold the superintendent responsible for the results achieved.

I have served during the terms of three superintendents, as well as an interim superintendent. Based on my experience, I know that the Board, the superintendent and the school district all function most effectively when there is a high level of trust and open communications between Board members and the superintendent.

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

I have and will continue to seek advice from all Board members on particular issues. Similarly, I am open to suggestions and advice from any MMSD staff members. The wider we can cast our net in terms of getting feedback from teachers and staff, the better and more informed our decisions can be.

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

Yes.

**22. Are you seeking 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?**

I think these responses are long enough and I appreciate your reading them to the end. I wrote about what I have learned during my School Board service in an article published in the Cap Times last March. You can find it here: [http://host.madison.com/ct/news/local/city-life/eight-lessons-what-i-ve-learned-from-atul-gawande-mark/article\\_73e615bd-90ab-5c47-a863-03c0dd3daf8a.html](http://host.madison.com/ct/news/local/city-life/eight-lessons-what-i-ve-learned-from-atul-gawande-mark/article_73e615bd-90ab-5c47-a863-03c0dd3daf8a.html)