

ELECTION PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 8, 2011

Nine candidates contending for four School Board seats

ARDEN HILLS — The seats of four incumbents on the Mounds View School Board — Lisa Sjobeck, Bob Helgeson, Susan Murphy and Sandra Westerman — are up for election this year. Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 8.

be great, so, too, is the possibility of academic calamity-given the additional teacher training, classroom behavior, developmental and financial issues this change will raise.

This area is so mission-critical it deserves a “super committee” comprised of parents, community leaders, instructors and administrators whose recommendations are binding.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: Without question, the state's per-pupil funding model is outdated. As the district has communicated in a “State of the District” video, the state's funding formula is outside the influence of the school board. It is widely accepted our district will experience four more years of flat state funding, and the board will need to operate with the state-local formula in place.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy within your school district?

A: The Mounds View Schools are fortunate to have very supportive taxpayers, whom I have joined with a “yes” vote for every levy since moving into the district in 1998. That said, we are in an economic crunch time like no other, and I believe all expenditure items need to be shown to support student outcomes before considering a levy increase.

One possible item is the Laurentian Environmental Center the district owns. As a one-time chaperone, these three-day outdoor learning experiences for the district's fifth- and seventh-graders are superb, and they should be continued. Currently though, no benefits are accruing to district visitors or taxpayers for the ownership.

Who can vote?

In general you are eligible to vote if you are 18 or older, are a U.S. citizen, are not a convicted felon and are a resident of the precinct in which you wish to vote. Voters who have not pre-registered may register on Election Day by bringing a Minnesota driver's license, learner's permit or Minnesota identification card (for other allowable identification, see <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/elections>). Questions on voting? Call 651-266-2171 or email elections@co.ramsey.mn.us.

Forum planned

The League of Women Voters New Brighton is sponsoring a candidate forum for Mounds View School Board at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 1 at Arden Hills City Hall, 1245 West Highway 96.

Absentee voting

Absentee voting ends at 3 p.m. Nov. 8 for Mounds View School Board elections. Voters may cast an absentee ballot in person during business hours at the Ramsey County Auditor's Office, 90 W. Plato Blvd., Suite 160 in St. Paul. The office is also open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 5 and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Nov. 7.

Those wishing to send in a ballot must first download a ballot application at www.sos.state.mn.us (or attach it to an email as a .pdf). After completion it must then be faxed to 651-266-2177; mailed to Ramsey County Elections at P.O. Box 6409, St. Paul, MN 55164; or emailed to elections@co.ramsey.mn.us. A ballot and envelope will be sent back; it must be completed and mailed to the above address.

Absentee ballots are admissible if voters are:

- away from their precinct on Election Day
- have an illness or disability that prevents them from voting at their polling place
- unable to vote on Election Day due to religious observance
- serving as an election judge in a precinct other than their own
- under an eligible emergency declared by the governor or quarantine declared by the federal or state government

More information is available at 651-266-2171.

Where to vote:

Shoreview and North Oaks residents vote at the following locations. Unsure of your precinct? Access http://xnet.co.ramsey.mn.us/elections/precinct_finder/.

- North Oaks Precinct 1 and 2: North Oaks City Hall, 100 Village Center Dr.
- Shoreview Precinct 2: St. Odilia's Catholic Church, 3495 Victoria St. N.
- Shoreview Precinct 3: 3920 Victoria St. N.
- Shoreview Precinct 5: Shoreview Community Center, 4580 Victoria St. N.
- Shoreview Precinct 6: Incarnation Lutheran Church, 4880 Hodgson Dr.
- Shoreview Precinct 7: Turtle Lake Elementary, 1141 Lepak Ct.
- Vadnais Heights Precinct 1: Vadnais Heights Commons, 665 E. County Rd. F.

Pinewood Elementary School. Each week I meet with my district assigned “reading buddy” and we play games, read books, and enjoy lunch together.

Weakness: Mounds View invests very little in technology that can be “held in your hands”. Calumet school district, in rural Michigan, recently gave iPads to every student in grades 4-12. We should consider doing something similar. Electronic textbooks and applications could be preinstalled on the device which would reduce our hardcover textbook expenses. This is a tech-savvy generation, and we need to keep up with its needs.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: Deficit spending: The current school board approved a \$7 million deficit in 2011. It approved spending \$113 million while only collecting \$106 million in tax revenue. This creates an unsustainable deficit caused by expenses increasing faster than tax revenue. This problem is solved in one of two ways: by reducing expenses or by increasing revenue. The current school board does not appear to be going down either of these paths. I will vote against any budget that is financially irresponsible and unsustainable. I will also put new ideas on the table that increase revenue, such as expanding the preschool program and leasing out open district space.

Student achievement: Our student body is constantly changing, and children need to be challenged. Low math test scores were recently reported. This should not be viewed as a sign of student “weakness”, it should be seen as a sign of student “boredom.” In my opinion, low test scores can be directly related to how engaged students are in class. If elected, I will do everything in my power to push forward programs that engage and challenge our youth, such as rapidly expanding the STEAM program to include more students from within our district.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: The state of Minnesota should increase funding each year 2 to 4 percent, in line with inflation. This increase should not be covered by increasing taxes in Minnesota. It should be covered by prioritizing education above other state needs, growing the economy, and lowering the unemployment rate.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: I do not support raising taxes. The district currently spends \$11,500 per student each year. This exceeds the tuition level of every private school in the district, so should be enough money to ensure a high-quality public education.

Marilyn Bunzo



Age: 52
Address: 127 15th Ave. NW, New Brighton, MN 55112
Occupation: Independent contractor, computer programming and website consulting

Public service experience: Curriculum Task Force on Developmental Spelling, Mounds View School District; Bel Air Elementary PTA Executive Board; Neighbors United levy volunteer; Girl Scout service unit manager, Girl Scout leader; Advisory Committee for the Product Program (Girl Scouts River Valleys, Girl Scouts St. Croix Valley); Advisory Committee for the Realignment (consolidation of five councils into River Valleys).

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: Our schools provide an excellent education to our students. The teachers and staff are dedicated and motivated.

Our schools excel in preparing college-bound students. However, I remain concerned that the needs of non-college-bound students are underserved.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: The largest challenge will be sufficient funding during an economic downturn. If elected, I will meet with groups to hear their perspective and to learn more about the situation. I will approach budget decisions with thoughts of how decisions will affect the students, the staff and the community.

Technology changes offer both fantastic opportunities and strong challenges. We need to support teachers and staff in transition to new technology and software with good training and adequate support. The students need to be prepared in elementary school to take on the requirements of knowledge in middle school. Sharing of software knowledge and consolidation of software licenses should be a priority across the district. If elected, I would encourage the formation of a curriculum task force combining technology and curriculum experts to focus on how to best improve technology education in the elementary schools.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: Yes, there should be changes. The formula used to calculate school district funding when the school population drops needs to be examined and changed. We cannot absorb the loss of the equivalent of 2.5 teachers' salaries for every “classroom” drop in size.

Using the schools to balance the state budget (or at least reduce the deficit) is a disturbing trend. The “borrowing” of school dollars by the state transfers the burden of loans to the schools but does not make the problem go away. I am not happy to hear legislators claim that schools have increased funding when they are taking away the money with the other hand through the loans to the state from the school districts which now total approximately \$2.5 million over the past three years.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: I would request a levy to replace an expiring levy. Most of the recent levy votes in the district have been of that nature. I would also request a levy if loss of state funding caused us to need additional funds to keep the schools running effectively and if it could be done with as little impact to the taxpayers as possible. I am sympathetic to the concerns of the taxpayers in the community but I also understand the value of good schools.

Bob Helgeson



Age: 56
Address: 1 Sunset Lane, North Oaks, MN 55127
Occupation: Teacher
Public service experience: Two term (eight-year) member of the ISD 621 School Board

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: ISD 621 is a leader in delivering excellent instruction to all of its students. The district is innovative and forward thinking, always looking for ways to improve programs that will best prepare students for a productive life after high school. The district seeks community input, and attempts to utilize its facilities in the most efficient manner possible. As with most Minnesota school districts, ISD 621 needs to address the “achievement gap” between demographic groups.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: First, the district must address the “achievement gap.” I would encourage the district to continue its productive partnership with the Northwest Integration Collaboration. This partnership has already produced results in terms of in-district programs, as well as exciting opportunities for students through partner districts.

A second challenge is to explain the arcane nature of education funding in the state of Minnesota. ISD 621 does make a concerted effort to communicate financial information as clearly as possible. As well, the district tries to run as lean an operation as possible while providing excellent educational opportunities — maximizing the public's return on investment. My role in that is to insist on a clear accounting of how resources are used, and to insist on continued efforts to improve services at less expense.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: Yes, there needs to be change. Current funding mechanisms are complex and difficult to track. Of late, the state has delayed payments to districts to balance its own budget, a practice that often leaves districts in a precarious financial state. Local levies are somewhat unpredictable, a recurrent need for basic operations, but subject to the economic and political climate. At the very least, the state's portion of school funding shouldn't be subject to delays. The bulk of state funding is on a per pupil basis and is allocated at a level rate across the state. Typically, no adjustments are made to reflect the higher cost of doing business incurred by metro districts. ISD 621 could benefit from such an adjustment. The Association of Metropolitan School Districts has been advocating for this for a number of years.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: My goal would be to avoid a tax levy increase. Most recently, the district simply asked for a renewal of an existing levy. Prior to that, the district asked for a levy that was less than allowed by state authority. With the current economic conditions, I would find it difficult to ask for an increase.

John Hakes



Age: 46
Address: 245 Lilac Lane, Shoreview, MN 55126
Occupation: At-home dad/ education blogger/ graduate student

Public service experience: 621 Education Foundation, Shoreview Environmental Quality Committee

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: Mounds View walks its talk in reaching out to the “academic middle.” Offering the ACT exam to every junior and the continuing refinement of individual learning plans & instruction show the district's commitment to supporting all students.

The district might better utilize the expertise of its residents. Campaigning, I have met scores of people-of-ten without kids in the district — with wonderful wisdom. The perspectives and objectivity of those residents could be available for the asking.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: Control of fees: K-12 fees are escalating. Besides transportation and extracurricular costs, families often pay for classroom supplies and learning materials. This approach does limit the local levy, and is justifiable. But two things might help: (1) a “classroom materials” fee policy to ensure fairness across the curriculum (2) greater use of the “Fee Pay” module within 621's online portal system for the District to understand the impact of fees.

Technology policy: Mounds View is changing its policy toward student use of personal technology in the classroom. Instead of prohibiting such tools, it will encourage mobile devices for educational purposes. While the potential uses for these items may

Tim Husnik



Age: 32
Address: 520 Lake Cove Court, Shoreview, MN 55126
Occupation: Internal financial consultant at Wells Fargo

Public service experience: Reading buddy mentor at Pinewood Elementary School; Finance Council member at St. Odilia Church, MBA ambassador at University of Minnesota

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: Strength: Mounds View has numerous programs where community members can become active in the district. For example, I am a reading buddy mentor at

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Amy Jones



Age: 40
Address: 526 Lake Ridge Dr. Shoreview, MN 55126
Occupation: Elementary curriculum coordinator, Stillwater Public Schools

Public service experience: 18 years of public school experience (including classroom teaching, curriculum work, student teacher supervising, university adjunct faculty)

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: Mounds View's greatest strengths are its teachers, staff and supportive families. We prepare a majority of our students for a successful future. We are now in a position to become a "great" school district. In order to move from good to great we need to pay attention to increased student achievement for all students and follow through on that promise with actions. Addressing the learning needs of all students is crucial to our district's future and every student deserves the opportunity to reach their maximum potential.

Of course, our greatest weakness is our financial situation, much of which is beyond our control. We need to make the best financial decisions possible so the cuts have the least impact on a student's classroom experience. We should not delay tough budgetary decisions.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: The most important issues facing education in Mounds View Schools involve funding decisions and ensuring increased student achievement for all.

My objective is to advocate for the following goals when elected to the board:

- Increase student achievement by making fiscally responsible and student-centered funding decisions that have the least impact on a student's classroom experience. We will increase efficiency at all levels of the organization by improving collaboration and communication.
- Make job-embedded professional learning a priority. Teachers deserve and require time for collaboration and problem solving (which includes a focus on data-based decision making and intensive math and reading interventions). When we build in that time in a systematic and intentional way, we will see increased student achievement and increased staff job satisfaction, which in turn will allow us to retain our master teachers.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

The state education funding formula is not working well for any district, and 621 is no exception. Inadequate funding has forced districts to rely on operating levies to make ends meet, which in turn puts a heavy burden on local property taxpayers.

It is very difficult for districts to do any future planning when they are not sure what future funding delays may be implemented. It is crucial that the state increase base level funding and remove the option of delaying school payments to balance the state budget.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: I would request and support a tax levy increase if I knew that we were already fully maximizing our current funding and that we had thoroughly evaluated the district in order to increase efficiency at all levels of the organization.

risk young learners chance for high achievement. Yet, that would have a financial impact on the current budget. Because of technology, the world has instant access to knowledge and communications. Our students need this technology and the technological literacy to go with it, but this also has a financial impact on the budget. Our new class of kindergarten students will be graduating from high school into a world we cannot even imagine. What are there educational needs going to be during the next 12 years? The challenge will really be twofold. What changes need to be implemented in the educational program in future years to maintain high achievement and postsecondary success and what resources will be necessary to accomplish that success. As a School Board member, I will bring creativity, knowledge, dedication and an unwavering commitment to provide a world class education to the children of this community.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: Yes, fully-funded mandates.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: If we were unable to fund an educational program that ensures high academic achievement and post secondary success for all our students.

Lisa Sjoberg



Age: 47
Address: 80 E Pleasant Lake Rd, North Oaks MN 55127
Occupation: Community volunteer
Public service experience: Mounds View School Board (five years), Ramsey County League of Local Governments (five years, current president)

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: Mounds View Public Schools has long been a leader in innovation and academic excellence. The pending introduction of the state's first Early College High School at Irondale, the STEAM initiatives at our middle schools, and offering the ACT college entrance exam to all high school juniors are clear indicators of the board's commitment to both innovation and academic excellence. Our district consistently ranks in the top 10 of districts in both the metro and the state. Both Irondale and Mounds View High School have ranked in the top 5 percent of high schools across the nation (Newsweek, June 2010).

Engaging our school community where nearly 80 percent of the homes currently don't have school-age children residing is a real test. Communicating effectively the value that our public schools bring to all who reside in our community is always an ongoing goal of the board.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: Managing our money wisely and providing rigorous and comprehensive programming to all students are challenges not only to our district, but districts across our state and nation. During these uncertain financial times, the solutions will be found by working collaboratively and communicating clearly with fellow board members, administration, staff, parents and the community. It will require proven and tested leadership, along with the ability to imagine the possibilities and the willingness to take calculated risks.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: The current funding model is broken and not sustainable. There have been many different ideas and suggestions that have been proposed over the last 5-8 years. None of them have gained any widespread level of support from either lawmakers and/or stakeholders. Until there is a willingness and desire to work collaboratively, I don't envision a solution that will gain the traction it needs to become law. It will be very difficult for any meaningful education funding reform to happen until the state's financial situation is in the black and stable.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: Given the current economic realities of both our state and nation, and the toll it has taken on families, I would be hard-pressed to ask taxpayers for a levy increase at this time. It is my hope that taxpayers will find value in the services they are currently receiving from our public schools and continue to support current levies already in place.

Sandra Westerman



Age: 41
Address: 5815 Evergreen Lane, Shoreview
Occupation: lawyer
Public service experience: Mounds View School Board member,

appointed June 2011

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: Mounds View Schools is one of the best in the state for academic excellence; that is evidenced by the 17 National Merit Scholars in our district this fall. Mounds View Schools is constantly seeking to innovate and take it to the next level.

Our greatest weakness is our location in a declining enrollment area. (However, recent enrollment numbers seem to be challenging this trend, at least for the short-term)

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: Long-term fiscal health. We must achieve structural budget reforms to ensure long-term financial health of the district. I will work with my board colleagues and district leadership to achieve necessary reforms in the districts' expenditures.

Achievement gap. We have long demonstrated our success in rigorous academic programming, but we must ensure we are preparing all students for success beyond high school. As a board member, I will support programs such as the Early College School at Irondale next fall. This program is targeted to the academic middle students who might not otherwise identify themselves as college bound and who can graduate from high school with a two-year degree. I am excited about the opportunity this presents to students in our district.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: First and foremost, the state should stop borrowing from the local school districts. The state should make the difficult budget decisions that may be necessary and stop delaying school aid payments. I believe we are far too reliant on the support of local property tax payers for funding of our schools. Although this support is needed, the state needs to have a greater responsibility for providing basic education. Operating levies should not be necessary to keep class sizes at reasonable levels. However, unless and until changes are made, the ability for local taxpayers to choose to provide additional funding to their schools is something I fully support.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: Mounds View Schools renewed an existing levy with over 65 percent voter approval just last year. I have been a big supporter and proponent of renewing our existing levies. I would not support any increases to the voter approved levy at this time. Local taxpayers are shouldering enough of the burden for a statewide education system provided for in our state's constitution.

Jonathan Weinhagen



Age: 28
Address: 327 Oakwood Drive, Shoreview, MN 55126
Occupation: Member services at St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce
Public service experience: no answer provided.

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: The Mounds View School District has a long history of excellence and is regarded as one of the top performing districts in the state. When it comes to fostering the success of high potential students there is no better place than a Mounds View School. The success of our high performers only further widens the achievement gap that exists.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: Like most districts throughout the state, the Mounds View Schools face increasing fiscal challenges. I commend the current and past boards for creating a reserve that allows us to respond to the current economic conditions. Moving forward, we need increased scrutiny as to the operational efficiency of the district and we need to present balanced budgets.

The achievement gap is a significant challenge facing the district. We have a responsibility to ensure that every student leaving the district is prepared for their next stage. We need to continue to innovate and push the envelope inside and out of the classroom to ensure that every student succeeds.

Q: In your opinion, should there be changes to the state's education funding plan, and if so what changes?

A: The state's education funding plan isn't perfect. Over the course of the next decade education funding at the state and federal levels will continue to evolve. As a board member I will be committed to understanding the implications of the state's funding plan and will help to craft a budget that works.

Q: Under what circumstances would you request a tax levy increase within your school district?

A: Nearly one-third of school districts in the state are seeking a tax levy in the upcoming election. I'm proud to be part of a district that is not currently seeking a levy. My experience working with various organizations suggests that there are often areas of inefficiency. As a district, we can do better.

Lee Porath



Age: 69
Address: 1550 19th Ave. NW, New Brighton, MN 55112
Occupation: Retired teacher
Public service experience: I was a teacher in the Mounds View schools for 41 years and have substituted for three years. I am a trained CERT (Citizen Emergency Response Team) for the New Brighton area.

Q: What do you think your school system does best? What do you think is its greatest weakness?

A: The current board has been developing and implementing a great educational model which identifies and integrates six key components: Shared Leadership and Accountability, Continuous Improvement, Essential Curriculum and Effective Instruction, Meaningful Family and Community Partnership, Healthy Learning Climate, Financial Oversight and Stewardship of Resources.

I believe we need to do a better job of explaining to the public and legislators what it really takes to be a world-class school district dedicated to high achievement and post secondary success for all students.

Q: Name two challenges in your district and how you might approach helping solve them if elected.

A: I am committed to the goal of high achievement and postsecondary success for all our students but there are no easy solutions, silver bullets, or quick fixes. All aspects of the educational process are interrelated. For example, quality early childhood education and all-day every-day kindergarten can greatly enhance at-





Remember to vote

November 8, 2011

