

FROM THE CANDIDATES: MASON CITY SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATE Q&A

The sole competitive race for Mason City's school board elections tasks voters with selecting three at-large directors from a pool of five candidates. Ahead of Election Day, which is Tuesday, Nov. 2, see their answers to our questions below.

Carol Dettmer



Occupation: Part-time Middle School Youth Director at Trinity Lutheran and Substitute Teacher for Mason City Community School District

Education: B.A. in Elementary Education and Spanish from Wartburg College, M.A. in Educational Administration from University of Iowa

Other: I have actively volunteered in the Mason City schools for 15 years and still actively help at Jefferson Elementary and with MCHS vocal music, athletic boosters, and post prom.

Constance Dianda



Occupation: caregiver for parent, volunteer for children's program weekly, volunteer at Living Free transition house for women Prairie

Ridge/jail offering one on one mentoring, Christian 12 step groups, life skill classes

Education: McKinley, Monroe, MCHS, NIACC, UNI double major Spanish and Elementary Ed

Other: I am very invested in individuals, children and families in our community and desire to see them living fulfilling and purposeful lives.

Cindy Garza



Occupation: Environmental Engineer with the DNR
Education: BS in Geological Engineering from The University of North Dakota

Jacob Schweitzer



Occupation: Fire Protection Field Analyst and Owner of J&J Medical
Education: BS in Fire Administration from Waldorf University

Other: Serve on the Board of Director at North Iowa Community Credit Union, Past President of Mason City Firefighter, Past Vice President of Iowa Professional Firefighters, Past Treasurer for the North Iowa Nine Labor Council, Four kids all attending school in Mason City (One at the high school, one at Lincoln, and two at Jefferson)

Alan Steckman



Occupation: Retired from the US Postal Service; Adjunct Professor, Buena Vista/Waldorf/Hamilton; Substitute Teacher, Mason City/Clear Lake Schools

Education: BA, University of Maryland, MBA Drake University

Other: Postmaster, Mason City, 1987-2002. Served on multiple Mason City community boards: Mason City Community Schools (current); Charter President, Sunrise Rotary; National Active and Retired Federal Employees (NARFE); United Way of Cerro Gordo; American Red Cross; Hospice of North Iowa; Mason City Community Theatre; Main Street Iowa, Mason City.

HOW SHOULD THE DISTRICT PROCEED TO GET STUDENTS BACK ON TRACK AMID LEARNING LOSS INFLUENCED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

MCCSD should continue to offer consistent, in-school education while keeping as many staff with students as possible. The district should focus on the parents/guardians of each student as they are children's most influential educators. Especially after the last year with some online instruction at home, parents are aware of their child's strengths and areas of growth. School staff and parents need to work together to hold students to high standards of progress as students adjust back to continuous and rigorous academic work at school. There may be instances where staff need to take a step back and re-teach coursework that was not absorbed well during the pandemic, especially if the coursework is foundational for future learning. For example, if the majority of students did not master pre-algebra skills, then students may now be frustrated with Algebra 1. School staff should keep adapting with teaching strategies to meet these needs.

The board needs to get feedback from the teachers and parents and make policy toward implementation

After seeing the 2021 fall results of summer slide screening, the students seem to be stable. Our K-6th grade students are not at the desired 80%, but approximately 60% are meeting the universal screening benchmarks. If our schools continue to monitor the progress and actively work with each child with programs like the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum (a program that provides students with 10-12 minutes of consistent and repeated instruction) we can continue to see progress.

There is no playbook available on how to recover the lag of education because of instructional time lost over the past couple of years. The first step is to identify where each student is at. That process has already started through assessments. Staff can then have a targeted approach to gauge and measure progress. Resources through

The priority of our district should be to make sure all students are on grade level. I would support students "in person" learning, when possible. Recent academic assessments have been completed. They've shown a need for attention directed at specific grade levels and subjects. I believe the most important subject in our District remains literacy. We have to implement methods of improving the ability to express one's self and understand written communication, using critical thinking. If this means more teachers, tutors, smaller class sizes then we must approve resources for such methods. We need to do continuous assessment and compare them with expectations and make sure our students are staying on track.

HOW WOULD YOU SUGGEST THE DISTRICT SPEND ITS PANDEMIC RELIEF MONEY?

Different buildings will have different needs; therefore, I agree with how MCCSD is currently allowing buildings to designate funds. One elementary has opted for a special reading teacher while another opted to reduce large class sizes in one grade level. At the JAMS and MCHS, they have spent extended contract time identifying and planning for the loss of learning and safety measures.

In general, there is power with people and funding should focus on staffing to have more brains, hearts, and hands with our students. The district needs to be careful though, as these funds are not long lasting and these positions will need to be eliminated or other funding streams must be identified.

Another need is for increased mental health care within the schools and social skill training at many grade levels. Additional staff and resources to assist with mental health and social skills would be valuable as well.

Again the board needs to get feedback from teachers as to what is most urgent.

The current use of the money that the district has established was a good investment.

The first wave of federal grants was spent on Chromebooks and hotspots to help with continuous learning when our schools went virtual. The last award was used for the hiring of additional staff members, an English learner teacher, an additional social worker, and other staff to help keep class sizes small. Smaller class sizes are a good idea even without a pandemic.

Funds have been spent on mitigation efforts, including cleaning supplies, masks, and equipment. If a student needs to stay home to isolate and minimize interruption with student learning, Chromebooks, iPads, and wireless hotspots are available. The district has also recouped the cost of additional staff and substitute teachers.

The District applies for reimbursement after any funds have already been spent. I support:

- making mental health services available to those students who want it
- hiring more teachers to reduce class size, and maintaining para-professionals
- hiring and pay incentives for subs and bus drivers
- the procurement of laptops and "hot spots" for internet access
- improvements in individual building's HVAC systems, and when necessary PPE equipment

SHOULD THE SCHOOL DISTRICT MANDATE MASKS IN SCHOOLS TO MITIGATE THE SPREAD OF COVID-19? WHY OR WHY NOT?

MCCSD should not mandate masks in any of the schools unless an individual school is dealing with a high rate of illness. If there is a low rate of infection in the school, there is no evidence that would support mask wearing at that time. When many students are absent due to illness, effective teaching is interrupted and learning is very difficult. Keeping students in school needs to be the priority.

No, research on masks shows cloth masks hold in bacteria, same with blue paper surgical masks causing some students to have associated health problems, rashes, infections etc. . Masks are not an effective barrier for the virus and only aid to stop droplets. They are also detrimental to learning for younger children who need to see facial expressions to interpret communication and create relationship. It should be up to the parents if they want their child to wear a mask.

The current mask mandate approved by the board at 7% does not differentiate between illnesses. What % are covid. What % are flu? What % are external physical injuries etc?

The current compromise that the school board has come up with is the best option. With the community divided on the issue of masking, the best alternative was to set action limits based on illness rates. Additionally, individual classrooms that have outbreaks are taking extra precautions to stop the spread.

I believe in following the medical and science community recommendations. Guidance from the Dept of Public Health and CDC should be followed.

The use of masks has already been presented to the School Board. Based upon the over 1,200 responses to this question, the public gave us about a 50/50 approval/denial about mask mandates. I voted for a compromise based on the overall illness rates encountered in a specific building in the District, not a district-wide mandate. I supported no change to this policy at our most recent Board meeting.

LAST SCHOOL YEAR, LIKE MUCH OF THE STATE, MASON CITY SAW A DECREASE IN ENROLLMENT NUMBERS. WHAT, IF ANY, CHANGES SHOULD BE MADE TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO REMAIN OR ENROLL IN THE DISTRICT?

If I feel emotionally connected and valued, then I am more likely to commit fully to an organization. To this point, I'd like to see investments of staff and materials to create an even stronger early childhood program as parent engagement is highest in early childhood school years. The district should look at fiscally responsible ways to increase family interactions in the early years and continue to build those relationships while students transition to the intermediate and middle school years. The schools need to work on family connections and being transparent about academic progress as well as behavior plans in all buildings so that families are encouraged to remain part of the MCCSD team.

Board needs to investigate why students left and find solutions to those items.

We have a loss of 91 students from last year. I'm not sure if we know the reasons, they could be homeschooled, homeless, moved out of the area, moved to another district or just untraceable. The families that want to keep their child at home could continue to be enrolled in the district by using the new virtual academy. We need to find out the reasons we lost each one of them and try to determine if we can find a way for them to return to the district.

The district must appeal to the parents to have them want to enroll their children within the district. The school district does and will need to continue to work with the City of Mason City, IEDA, NIACC, M.C. Chamber of Commerce, and other stakeholders to attract and retain businesses in North Iowa.

I served on the planning committee and voted for the approval of the construction of the new expanded gymnasium and natatorium. I fully believe the construction of these facilities will strongly encourage open enrollments to our District from nearby school districts. Our outstanding and award-winning music program is also an important draw. I approved the establishment of the Virtual Academy which gives flexibility for parents and students who want to enroll in an Iowa school approved curriculum. I believe all these things, along with high academic standards, will make Mason City Community School District a stand out in North Iowa and a desirable district to attend.

THIS SCHOOL YEAR THE DISTRICT IS SEEING A FIRST: A VIRTUAL ACADEMY FOR ALL GRADE LEVELS. WHAT SHOULD THE DISTRICT'S GOALS BE FOR THE ACADEMY GOING FORWARD?

MCCSD has a virtual academy because of their mission to provide quality education for all in a caring and responsive environment. The district responded in a caring way to students with health concerns and special family needs, and also protected its asset of enrolled students while even attracting students from other districts. Depending upon the utilization of virtual learning as the pandemic wanes, the need for this virtual academy may need to be reassessed. If the program usage declines, MCCSD will again have the opportunity to be responsive by possibly eliminating or revising the virtual program. On the other hand, if the program grows, hopefully teachers within the district will step forward in the areas that are currently being outsourced and provide local instruction for all areas of the curriculum at a lower cost.

What are the districts goals for in class learning? Are these being addressed thru virtual academy? The board does not operate in a vacuum and should be drawing information from teachers, students and parents before making decisions.

I love the idea of a virtual academy. This learning option should continue to be a supported alternative for the district. It encourages more students to be enrolled in the district because of its flexibility. Programs like these make our district more attractive to families, which is great not for only our schools, but also for our community.

Again, with parents having a choice with open enrollment, this provides another option that is otherwise not available in North Iowa. Parents were open enrolling their kids into other virtual schools. This signals to the district that we have a need. Rather than losing more students to other online schools, we decided to offer it here with the hopes of keeping these students within our own district while also providing an option to parents across the state. Our enrollment is about 80 total students for this calendar year, with most being high school age. We are fortunate to have a manageable number of students enrolled to allow then it to grow organically.

I believe the District should follow the traditional business cycle. The Virtual Academy, like all private and public services, needs to set goals, act on those goals, then evaluate the achievement, and determine whether adjustments are needed to be made each academic year or more often.

Some biographical information from candidates has been lightly edited for length.