

Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce

Candidate Questionnaire

Spring Election 2023 – Board of Education, Oshkosh Area School District

Please provide some personal background information.

- Name: **Kelly DeWitt**

- Occupation: **Economic Support Specialist**

- List any community activities you are involved with: **Volunteer with the Oshkosh Farmers Market, St. Jude’s Catholic Church Parishioner. In the past, I was part of one of the 1st groups of volunteers at the Day by Day Warming Shelter when they first opened. I also delivered meals on Wheels on Sunday mornings every week.**

1. What do you believe is your primary responsibility as a board member? What will be your most important objective if you are elected to the board?

**I believe that my primary responsibility (outside of setting the tax levy, adopting policies, the curriculum, and the budget along with overseeing resources) is to represent the parents, families and taxpayers of the Oshkosh School District. Right now, with the continued increase in cost of living across the board, a focus on keeping the district affordable is important to me.**

2. There are distinct differences between each of the three candidates that are seeking positions on the Board of Education. Please outline what distinguishes your candidacy and qualifications than those of your opponents.

**As a mom of two young children, a lifelong resident of Oshkosh and product of our public schools, I am fully invested in getting our students back to the basics. I have 11 years of experience working in the human services field as a case worker serving children and families throughout our district. This experience has provided me with a deeper understanding of not only the school district, but also the needs of our community as a whole. I have experience in the following areas: assessment, planning, implementation, coordination and evaluation all of which make me an asset to the board. I believe that, as a school board member, valuing community input is vital when making decisions that impact not only our students and staff, but the community as a whole as well.**

**I want to make sure that every one of our tax dollars and every hour in the classroom is devoted to helping every child, regardless of upbringing, economic status, or learning ability. We need to start with literacy, math, and writing. I will honor parents as the chief stakeholders in their childrens’ education. I believe that our children, families, and community deserve a leader who is willing to roll up her sleeves to do the work to raise our test scores, narrow the achievement gap, and listen to our community. If we want the best future possible for our children, we need solutions to improve outcomes, and I want to be part of those solutions.**

3. The Department of Public Instruction produces annual report cards that are an indicator of overall student achievement and engagement. While the Oshkosh Area School District received an overall score of 68.7 which puts the district in the “Meets Expectations” category, there are still opportunities for improvement when compared to the rest of the state in Advanced and Proficiency ratings such as English, Language Arts & Mathematics. As a member of the Board of Education, what will you do to ensure improved scores in these two areas?

**First and foremost, I believe that it is vital to get back to basics at the forefront of our teaching. We have to work with our parents, teachers, and paraprofessionals to raise the bar. We have students that are leaving our schools unable to read or perform basic math skills. As far as improving literacy, I believe that putting a big emphasis on phonics, especially at the early and elementary levels will help here. As far as improving math scores go, I think that there's a few things that the board can do. First, looking closely at how math is being taught. The common core math that is being taught has caused some concern. Next, the board should consider starting a professional learning community that can help create a plan of action to improve test scores in this space.**

4. In a recent state-wide survey, employers have indicated that school districts are not placing enough emphasis on core subjects like reading, writing, mathematics and other STEM programming. As a member of the Board of Education, what are you going to do to ensure that the District invests educational dollars in these areas?

**I believe that this is something that members of the board really need to sit down and have honest conversations about. If our students are matriculating through our schools unable to embrace the basic math, reading, and writing skills required of them, we as a board must ensure that we are doing everything we can to help our students. We need to be putting a primary focus on how we can help to improve these skills. We need to make sure that we are implementing a high-quality curriculum that has a core focus on math, literacy and STEM.**

5. Tech Education - the old Industrial Arts programs - has been slowly going away for many years for various reasons. Please describe your thoughts as to the need for these programs. Describe how much emphasis/weight you personally would put on this in your decision-making process as well as from a policy, expectations, and accountability stance?

**I believe that tech ed programs are an absolute must. A fair number of our students do not have the desire or means to attend a university or tech school. Their education ends with us, and then they matriculate into the workforce. These tech ed programs provide our students with the tools to go directly into the workforce and be successful. Tech ed also provides students the opportunity to work independently, while gaining decision making, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. Without these programs and without teaching these skills, everyone will suffer. Our community has a workforce shortage, and this shortage isn't going away anytime soon. During a time when we have industries starving for educated tradesmen, I believe that we need to put a focus back on the tech ed front and keep these programs in mind when making policy decisions.**

6. Long Range Planning – Oshkosh has made significant progress as it relates to facility improvement and one example is the construction of Vel Phillips Middle School which is

scheduled to open in the fall of 2024. However, Oshkosh residents have seen their annual OASD tax bills increase almost 30% since 2020. With an updated 10-year Facility Plan in place, please describe how you will stabilize and prioritize this growth in expenditures with more proposed school improvement projects on the horizon. Also discuss your thoughts on how the OASD should address replacement plans and long-term preventative maintenance on its aging facilities and specifically our high schools.

**Our schools are facing considerable challenges financially in part to declining enrollment, a lack of a shared revenue increase, and rising costs of services. There has been much discussion in the past decade on raising revenue and building new schools, but these conversations have not had enough community input and engagement on the matter. The community has been extremely generous in supporting our schools with their donations, referendum support, and tax dollars, and I feel our leadership has been too passive when it comes to delivering cost efficiencies and expense reductions. For example, we have been told that the new schools being built will cost less to run. That's great. However, when do those savings offset the upfront cost and the debt servicing required to build them? How long will it take for us to see these savings? Was there a more cost friendly option that still gave us a good building? Government has to live within its means as the rest of us have to do every day to keep our finances in order. I will be asking these questions and advocating for more fiscally responsible policies with the taxpayers' hard earned dollars to maintain the public trust.**

7. What reforms, if any, would you support to fund public school operations?

**As I said, we have to live within our means as a school district. We must separate needs from wants in our budgets. The city and county are doing that, and we should too. I'd support more oversight for our ESSER and ARPA dollars so we don't have to raise taxes when those funds run out. We should look to provide property tax relief where we can without cutting back on the essential services that our children and families rely on. I support the state legislature and Governor Evers coming together on a fix for shared revenue, but we can't have increased shared revenue as an excuse to spend recklessly.**

8. The OASD has lost student enrollment due to the Covid-19 situation and overall population demographics. How do you plan to stop the departure of children from our district either going to private schools or surrounding districts? How do you plan make up for the lost dollars from students who have left the district?

**We need to be asking families that left why they left. There's a reason, and we MUST figure out those reasons and make some changes for the future. The truth is we lost students due to COVID in part because of the way the district administration and the school board reacted to it. The best way to increase our enrollment is by creating a great education that we're proud of. We need to make sure that we are continuing to hire great staff and administrators while electing board members who are willing to ask the tough questions and work towards solutions to improve our outcomes. I want all of our stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, the local business community, and more) to have a seat at the table. When we do that, we'll make solid consensus-based decisions that will keep OASD a place we're proud to call ours.**