

NSPA Writer of the Year Nomination: **William Tong**

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Personal Statement

Whether I was galvanized by the COVID-19 pandemic or spurred by our school administration's censorship attempts two years ago, much of my work as a member of the Central Times this year was in keeping school officials accountable. I routinely reported on our school district's pandemic "Return to Learn" plans and guided discussions with other staff members to craft pertinent editorials aiming to communicate what we thought students and families needed during this time.

Reporting for the public good also includes speaking up for the voiceless, and in our school district, many teachers were—and still are—unable to air their concerns to administrators. That's why in the fall, I investigated and reported on how our district provided COVID-19-based teacher accommodations. In the process, I interviewed teachers, administrators, students and even staff from other school districts, and pored over four years of public district personnel records.

While focusing heavily on COVID-19 reporting this year, I did not hesitate to cover breaking news and school community politics. Throughout the winter, I spent over 40 hours interviewing school board candidates and compiling their responses, publishing a comprehensive voting guide that thousands of voters utilized. I also penned a staff editorial response to an article published in *The Federalist* that misconstrued and attacked equity training in our school district. The morning after a midnight tornado swept through our town, I hurried to the scene with other staff members to report on the damage that had occurred and published a multimedia package by that evening. Through writing breaking news to in-depth investigations to staff editorials, I've gotten a better glimpse at the challenges—and thrills—of the journalism profession.

Outside of my role as a writer, I've also edited virtually every written article published in Central Times this year, working with every staff member in the process. My experience with AP style has not only helped me win sectional and state awards for copy editing, but also teach younger staff members to ensure quality, professionalism and consistency in their writing.

Writing, reporting and editing through a full year of a once-in-a-century pandemic has taught me that journalism is a grueling profession. It is filled with administrators who don't want to divulge an iota of useful information, outspoken parents looking to vilify perspectives that don't match their own—our publication was compared to the Gestapo for an article about teachers failing to wear their masks I had written—and students who ditch interview after interview.

Despite these difficulties, the impact we can make is very real. The FOIA requests I filed contributed to an effort that led to our district publishing a COVID-19 dashboard. Our editorial regarding equity training fueled discussion within the community. My report on staff accommodations—or for some, the lack thereof—showed teachers that people cared. In a period when every journalistic institution seems to be taking a side and pushing an agenda, my work this year has reaffirmed my faith in the truth, because even just by reporting the facts, I could do my part to improve our community.

‘Very frustrated’: D203 provides limited options for staff with needs

Nov. 10, 2020

For Mike Jarvis, an Earth Science and AP Environmental Science teacher at Naperville Central, 2020 has been a struggle.

At the beginning of the year, his wife was diagnosed with cancer and has since endured several surgeries and chemotherapy. Upon completing her treatment, the chemotherapy has left her with a weakened immune system, as is typical for many cancer patients. She lives with asthma that is triggered by respiratory infection as well.

With the health of his wife in mind, Jarvis sought accommodations from District 203, asking to be allowed to teach his classes remotely.

His request was denied.

“I was willing to teach from home,” Jarvis said. “[But] the district insisted teachers had to be there two days a week [during Stage 1 learning].”

He navigated Stage 1 by taking off two days a week to avoid having to work from school. But once the start date for Stage 2 was announced and all full-time staff were told to work from their buildings five days a week, he saw no choice but to take a leave of absence.

“I’m very frustrated; I’m a competent teacher. I have the ability to teach students remotely,” Jarvis said. He also called the many changes to the school calendar and work conditions “especially hard for the teachers.”

Jarvis will not be returning for the rest of the semester.

A lack of accommodations

Jarvis says the district wasn’t willing to accommodate his request to teach remotely despite his circumstances, and that they didn’t offer him any accommodations beyond those in the “Return to Learn” plan.

“They said legally you are allowed to take a leave: if that’s what you choose, you can do that,” Jarvis said. “There was no going back and forth. It was essentially: take a leave or come in and follow our rules. There was no middle ground.”

But, according to Bob Ross, District 203's Chief Human Resources Officer, his department goes through an extensive process of working through requests to try to provide support to employees.

"We'll always talk to every employee and try to see what we can do to help them," Ross said. "Some accommodations we've made for folks might have to do with increased PPE [and protective] shields."

During the past several weeks, Central Times has spoken with District 203 teachers at the elementary, junior high and high school levels who were also denied accommodations that would allow them to teach students from home in situations where they either feared for their safety in their buildings or feared the consequences that working from school could have on family members. Some teachers were denied accommodations when asking for work flexibility so that they could provide childcare to their own children.

According to Dan Iverson, president of the Naperville Unit Education Association (NUEA), the teacher's union for District 203, administrators are under no legal obligation to provide accommodations to staff whose family members are at risk for COVID-19.

Still, many area school districts are allowing staff to work from home if family members have serious medical conditions. For instance, Joliet West High School is currently allowing small numbers of students into the building, similar to District 203. But Jenn Galloy, an English teacher at Joliet West, was able to secure remote teaching accommodations because her child has medical needs that make him a high risk for potential complications if he should contract COVID-19.

"You had a choice if you wanted to go in or not," Galloy said. "If we went hybrid... I would just have to prove why I would be a risk [to] him."

Galloy does not support requiring teachers to work from school, nor does she believe teachers should have to take an unpaid leave of absence, especially if they have family members at risk for COVID-19.

"I would be frustrated with that response," Galloy said. "Luckily, my school district is taking our concerns into consideration."

The push to return to school buildings

The district hasn't typically allowed staff whose family members have underlying health risks related to COVID-19 to teach remotely because they prefer that teachers work onsite to facilitate students' return to schools. This comes at a time when a vocal group of community members

continue to lobby for an immediate return to in-person learning and as the district's scheduled Stage 3 hybrid phase draws near.

"We're bringing students into our schools right now, so we need staff to work with the students," Ross said. "We need staff in the building because that's where the kids are supposed to be."

Administrators hope that if teachers are in buildings, they can work face-to-face with students who need extra help.

"You don't get a good understanding of how your students are doing through Zoom," said Carrie McFadden, Assistant Principal of Operations at Naperville Central.

But many students, parents and teachers aren't convinced that the district's expressed reasons for returning to in-person instruction justify the denial of accommodations teachers like Jarvis requested.

"I never felt they gave a good reason why," Jarvis said. "They said it gets you comfortable with safety protocols and makes the students feel like they're in a classroom setting. I could throw in a [virtual] background of a classroom if that made students feel better, and adjusting to safety protocols could be done in a week."

Jarvis contends that especially as most high schoolers are still learning completely via Zoom, it would not have made a difference, at least for the near future, if he taught remotely. Additionally, staff who are working from buildings are still doing their jobs in an isolated fashion, teaching students while locking themselves alone in classrooms.

"They wanted [to give] an opportunity for our groups to work in person," Jarvis said. "Most [professional learning community (PLC)] meetings are happening on Zoom anyway."

For their part, students would rather have their originally assigned teachers instructing from home than a substitute teaching from school, as that transition results in a disruption to learning.

"Our new teacher is very kind and is doing her best to manage all of [Jarvis's] classes, but I personally feel our class is essentially starting over again," senior Gabi Kwiecien said. "We are doing 'get to know you' presentations again and that time would have been used for other activities."

Filling the gaps

According to District 203 **adoption of personnel reports**, 30 staff members took leaves of absence between March 16 and Oct. 19 district wide, though several staff members that the Central Times is aware of having taken a leave of absence for COVID-19 related reasons were

not listed. Between the same period last year, 23 staff members took leave. Not all leaves were due to COVID-19 reasons, but the pandemic has definitely been a driving factor.

“We have people on leave, who, had the pandemic not happened, that wouldn’t be the case,” Ross said.

COVID-19 related retirements, resignations and leaves have contributed to staff turnover this year. While staff are always coming and going, the hiring process has been challenging during the pandemic.

“[Principal Bill] Wiesbrook has been working hard,” McFadden said. “He’s saying: ‘I’m calling everyone that is listed in our system for [job applications], and everyone I talk to is saying [they] have a job now.’”

Short-notice retirements, resignations, leaves of absence and an ever changing “**Return to Learn**” plan are additional hurdles for replacing teachers quickly.

“The longer time we have to go find someone, the better,” Ross said. “If someone leaves on shorter notice, of course that’s harder.”

Overall, though, Ross says hiring this year is going well.

“We’re stocking up on the number of substitute teachers we have available to us,” Ross said. “So far I think we’ve been able to keep up. It’s really important to us that we have the highest quality educators in the world.”

There are currently 103 **job vacancies** throughout the district, with 9 openings at Central. Three are for teaching positions, two for special education, two for building substitutes and two for support staff. For the unfilled teaching positions, teacher overloads, instructors teaching extra classes, are used as a temporary fix.

Community response

Many students are frustrated that teachers with extenuating family medical situations aren’t allowed to teach remotely.

“I was really shocked because the district wasn’t taking into consideration someone who was sick and could potentially die,” Kwiecien said, referring to Jarvis’ wife. “I took this personally because he’s a great teacher and he’s super passionate about his job.”

Kwiecien, one of Jarvis’s AP Environmental Science students, has started a **petition** on Change.org asking D203 administrators and board members to allow remote instruction as an

option for teachers. As of Nov. 10, 1,353 individuals have signed it. Central student ambassador William Ma also brought the petition to the attention of the district at the **Oct. 19 Board of Education meeting**.

Individual building administrators, though privy to specific staffing circumstances, aren't typically involved in these kinds of human resources decisions.

"I don't think we're really asked for input: 'would you like this teacher to teach remotely?'" McFadden said. "Obviously we're going to say that our current teachers are the best ones to teach [our classes], hands down."

At the end of the day, teachers, students, family members and even other administrators are confused and frustrated by the district's decisions to not provide accommodations for these staff members.

One of Jarvis's biggest worries about taking a leave of absence is what will happen to his students.

"I've heard many times we want to try and provide stability to students at this time," Jarvis said. "Obviously, this makes it less stable."

Editorial: Federalist critique of D203 equity training a dangerous distraction

March 8, 2021

Last week, The Federalist, a national conservative online magazine, **published** a story claiming that a Feb. 26 Naperville District 203 equity training was an “attack” on teachers, specifically white ones. The article was constructed using information leaked to the publication by a staff member from our very own school, who is identified in the story only as a “whistleblower.” The article makes the case that an acknowledgement of and efforts to address systemic racism leads to further discrimination. In addition to making several absurd claims, the article also essentially denies the existence of white privilege or racial injustices within the school system, even going so far as to place terms like antiracism in quotation marks to indicate that they are figurative language.

Momentarily setting its troubled content aside, it must be said that we have seldom seen the lines of opinion and news so horrifically blurred together. As mentioned, there’s the continuous weaponization of punctuation, where quotation marks are used to emphasize an indignation toward opposing beliefs. Loaded language is often used with little context added, and a strategically-worded clickbait headline is used to provoke and mislead readers: “Illinois Teachers Shamed For Color Of Their Skin In Taxpayer-Sponsored ‘Antiracist’ Training.”

Though Central Times recognizes the right of any publication to align with any ideology and exercise their free speech, at its core, this article is extremely one-sided and deceptive. In fact, the results of an anonymous survey, provided to CT by school administration, showed that 140 of the 146 Central staff who responded agreed that the institute’s content “increased [their] knowledge and ability to better perform in [their] role.”

The problematic article, penned by Gabe Kaminsky, amplifies the charged arguments made by the whistleblower. The whistleblower calls on us to “look at the children as individuals,” and in that, we completely agree. But because an individual’s identity is composed of their race, religion, heritage, gender, sexual orientation, experiences, etc., things they have no control over, it is important to not *disregard* these facets of their identity. This is exactly what antiracist training teaches.

Another unsubstantiated claim from the whistleblower: “they are saying that if you are white, you are racist and have white privilege. Even if you say you are not racist, you are told you are.” Nowhere does equity training specifically equate being white to being racist; it is the lack of awareness and conscious effort to fight discrimination that creates racism. The colorblind approach to race and ethnicity is now largely seen as a skin-deep dismissal of the problem rather than a friendly acceptance of all people, regardless of their race.

From our vantage point, the inherent harm in antiracism training is that it might make the trainees uncomfortable. And yet, uncomfortable is an underwhelming word to describe how many of our marginalized students feel at Central on a regular basis. Perhaps you're aware of the incidents that have been rightfully picked up by national news media, such as when, two years ago, a Naperville Central student posted islamophobic comments on their Snapchat to "commemorate" 9/11, or last year, when a Naperville Central student posted a Craigslist advertisement designating a Black student as a "slave for sale." Others go unaddressed. At our school, a teacher can—and did—say "chink" (a racial slur) in front of a Chinese student without reprimand, while another teacher recently defended a colleague's use of the n-word during a meeting.

When these events occur, both students and staff members are typically too afraid to report them, which contributes to an already suffocating air of silence in our schools. This anonymous whistleblower who felt they couldn't speak their mind to district administrators only further highlights the asphyxiating culture here. Therefore, the problem we should address isn't antiracism training like Kaminsky claims, but a lack of open discourse, which the equity institute actually provided for.

The Central Times commends Naperville District 203's efforts to provide educators and staff with ongoing equity training and vehemently denounces Kaminsky's article and its attempt to sell us ideology as fact. It is the acknowledgement of disparities within our community and a united effort to alleviate those inequities that will ultimately lead to fewer incidents of racism and discrimination, helping more students succeed in their learning environment.

Despite being a moderately conservative community, Naperville by and large recognizes the legacy of race in this country, and the work our school district and city council has started reflects a collective will to address that narrative. We should not feel guilty or confused by the oversimplified, harmful views of a tiny minority, because those opinions have been blown out of proportion by underhanded means. We are all obligated to stand by our progress, march forward without fear and fix the issues of the day. Only then can we, in the words of the whistleblower, "create a society that works together, a society that has the values that our country was founded on."

D203 school board candidate overviews

Consolidated Elections to be held April 6

March 9, 2021

A consolidated DuPage County general election will be held on April 6. In addition to open seats for Naperville city council, Naperville Township governance positions and Naperville Park District Commission, there are four open seats on the Naperville Community Unit School District 203 Board of Education.

Of the nine candidates running, Kristin Fitzgerald is the current president of the board, Donna Wandke is the current vice president and Charles Cush is a current board member. After board member Janet Yang-Rohr was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives and stepped down from her post, Anthony Casey was appointed by the current Board on March 1 to fill her spot.

What is the Board of Education?

The Board is a governing body of seven elected members, each with one vote, that provides oversight and guidance to the district administration. They have the power to budget, set goals for the district and vote on larger policies the district is looking to implement, including curriculum changes and contracts with third parties. Additionally, the board has the authority to hire and fire the district superintendent or any other district employee. District administration has the power to implement board policies and run day to day operations.

The board holds regular biweekly meetings, where they listen to public comments, provide information to the public through reports from the board president, superintendent and student ambassadors, and vote on new policies and programs.

You can read the board's policies here and board meeting agendas [here](#).

Who are the candidates?

Click on each candidate to see each interview.

[Included after this overview are the interviews with each candidate. The full design for this story can be found by clicking the link provided for this story]

Central Times spoke with the candidates for District 203's school board. Responses have, in some cases, been edited for length and grammar, though we have made every effort to preserve each candidate's messages. Statements made by candidates are opinions held by the candidates, not the Central Times. You can also visit the DuPage County Board of Elections [website](#) to find out how you can get involved and cast your ballot.

What are some campaign issues in this election?

Like most things this year, the board election will largely be centered around the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some community members are concerned by the lack of in-person learning their students are receiving, others about potential COVID risks that come from attending classes in a building and many a mix of both.

During the Aug. 17, 2020 board meeting, the current board passed a “**Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.**” The fifth provision of the resolved clause, which states that the “Superintendent shall have the authority to further develop, revise, and implement the [Return to Learn] plan consistent with the parameters set forth herein; consistent with further guidance from the State of Illinois, consistent with the Illinois School Code, and in consultation with the Board of Education,” has drawn considerable controversy from the district community.

Proponents of the resolution point to the fact that this is a structure of communication and oversight that the district’s board and any district’s board has always used, and that the resolution has not taken away any power they had before. Opponents view it as the current board relinquishing their decision-making authority to the superintendent.

Keep in mind, however, that the four-year term of board members begins within 21 days of the election as per board policy 2:50, meaning the successful candidates will likely assume office in mid or late April. Much of their work will therefore pertain to the 2021-2022 and subsequent school years. The new board will probably be more focused on helping the district recover from learning loss (academic, emotional and social) and teacher fatigue.

Additionally, as incidents of police brutality and hate crimes dominate the news, the board will also evaluate the district’s progress in educating students to be respectful and inclusive in a safe and equitable learning environment.

Thomas Andrew Binkowski

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I go by my middle name, Andrew. I am a professor of computer science at the University of Chicago, [and] my academic research is focused on computational drug discovery. I went to [the University of Illinois]. I got an undergraduate in chemical engineering. I have a PhD in bioengineering [and] did my [postdoctoral] work at Argonne National Lab for about 15 years. I was on a national science foundation grant that was aiming to integrate computer science into math curriculum in K-12.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you’re elected?

It would be nice to include junior high and maybe even elementary school [students] as student ambassadors on the board. It’s my own personal bias, but I think that we should try to figure out

integrating more computer science as a core competency. It's ubiquitous across all learning in all jobs. We have the infrastructure advantage of everybody having a computer. We [also] need to define new digital citizenship standards for everybody. [Students] would get [assignments] on websites that had advertisements that weren't appropriate, had to use their Google logins to log into or collect information about your Google suite account. We should encourage teachers to work together [and] develop the curriculum that they're going to give to our kids and not just cut and paste together stuff they find. [And], no matter what school looks like next year, if it's remote, hybrid or in-person, we have to have snow days, [for] in-person [and] remote learners.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

It's been confusing. I think a lot of it has to do with the communication. They would just say, 'we're following this metric this week.' They just waited it out long enough until it seemed like it was okay. For such a world class school district it seems that we were caught off guard. There might be some things that were, from an educational standpoint, an improvement, [like block scheduling or asynchronous Mondays]. My niece goes to Naper Elementary School, and their fifth grade was so crowded that they [are] at Washington Junior High. There are definitely options and flexibility, [but] It just seems that there hasn't been a real concerted effort to actually try to figure anything out.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

Getting a vaccine for children is not realistic by next fall in any way. They just started doing clinical trials on it. They wouldn't even have approval yet. It ultimately should rest in the family whether or not they want to pursue that. [The district has] offered the testing, [and] the percentage of the community [that] has opted into it is very low. That sends a message that this is something that the community doesn't want.

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

The district did say that they were planning to go back full time next year, [and] that their goal is to try this year, too. Hopefully, that excitement for going back to school will make everybody forget the misery for the past 11 months. The only thing that the board can do is celebrate the teachers as much as possible [and] make sure that they have the resource available to them.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

I don't think it makes any sense whatsoever. It is not clear what purpose that actually served. There [were] no other school districts around us that did anything similar. If there's a legal reason for it, they should just say with transparency, 'we have to do this because we don't want to get

sued.' The other thing that was even weirder about the whole situation is one of the board members objected to it. Paul Leong said no. If this was something that was mandated by the state, then you're suggesting that he went against state law. It just seemed like they weren't up to actually addressing the situation, and they didn't want to bear the culpability of [an] unhappy community.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

At the very top level, it starts with identifying the right teachers. There's definitely a gap in addressing parents in their home. A parent can laugh or say: 'that's not important. Don't worry about that. That's not really how it happened.' Parents are the first teachers of their kids, [and] making parents more aware ultimately is going to help.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

I'm a parent of four District 203 students. I have first hand experience of what's happening in the district. I've been actively involved since my oldest daughter was in kindergarten, volunteering on a weekly basis for the past 10 years inside of schools. I'm also a teacher. I know what it's like during remote learning. I am familiar with curriculum development, design, execution and pedagogy. I'm also a scientist who's spent almost 15 years doing drug discovery research. I can read the scientific papers [and] put them together. It gives me experience and objectivity, the kinds of things the school board needs to become a world-class school district [again].

Find out more about Andrew Binkowski:

[Campaign Website](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

Charles Cush

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I currently serve on the board; I was elected four years ago. Before that, I was appointed by the prior board to fill a vacancy left by the resignation of a board member at the time. I've worked for a number of Fortune 500 companies, and so I understand the concept of operating a business.

What prior experience do you have on the Board of Education?

We've been extremely good stewards of the resources. We voted to under-levy, [or reduce] the amount of taxes that the school district was requesting from the municipality. I'm very proud that we've done quite a bit of work and closing achievement gaps between our highest achieving under-achieving cohorts. When you look at school districts as it ranks nationwide, we are number 39, according to Niche out of around 10,700 school districts, which puts us in the 99th percentile.

Academics are critically important, but beyond that is how you can exercise your leadership. [I've been] an advocate for programs like the [Business] INCubator program.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you're re-elected?

[I'll look] for ways to continue to be very resourceful with our dollars to make sure that we're not taking more resources from the community [than needed]. [We'll] continue to know those achievement gaps and push for initiatives like early childhood education.

It's really important for us to assess where folks are from a social-emotional learning perspective, an academic performance perspective, and put mitigations in place to make sure that we're providing the community with the level of support.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

The one word I would use to describe their response is responsible. The COVID-19 pandemic was a big curveball for everyone. I think that the administration did a nice job of looking at and weighing the risks and making a good decision. Looking back, knowing now things that we didn't know, there are always opportunities to potentially do things a little bit differently. But given the information that was available at the time, I think that we ultimately made the right call.

I want to make sure that the answers we are giving people are what we know for sure, as opposed to saying, "we think we can do this." I know that there's been some criticism from the community [that], "you had a plan, and then you pull back on the plan?" Well, if the numbers change, rate of infection in the county changes, or advice for the health department changes, that's going to create a fluid situation.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

I'd have to evaluate and understand the data. There are some very high performing school districts who are making testing mandatory, but I would want to understand the pulse of the community in terms of where we are. I'm willing to bet on the community and see where we get in terms of voluntary participation. [As for the vaccine], I don't know that medical science has said that it's going to be required. Right now, they're not recommending a vaccine for folks under a certain age and things like that.

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

I would assess the problem by gathering feedback from teachers about the challenges they are facing, ensure that we are providing adequate training and resources to drive efficiency in prep time and content delivery and invest in additional supports (i.e. teaching assistants) [or] potentially look at scheduling options to prevent burnout and to provide adequate rest to allow our teaches to "recharge". If we mitigate burnout and address this need head on, we can avoid turnover issues, which is important because turnover itself can cause significant disruption to the learning environment—a proactive approach is key.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

That resolution has been touted as: “we wrote the superintendent a blank check.” That’s absolutely not the case. It is short term; it gives the superintendent the opportunity to make some decisions without having to convene [the] entire board, because convening an entire board meeting means that it’s an open meeting, [so] you have to have a 48-hour notice. As you can imagine, in a pandemic, when things are fluid, there are probably some things that need to be decided a bit faster than that amount of time.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

The pandemic, actually, to some degree, helped heighten the awareness around some of the racial injustice and social unrest that we’ve seen in society, and as a district, we’re ahead of it. I think it’s important for us to continue to work as a board through our Director of Diversity and some of the initiatives we have in place to make sure that we are hearing from a broad range of voices in the community and understanding what we need to do there.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

I believe that every student has the potential to achieve great things, every student has unlimited potential. As a school district and as a community, it is important to make sure that we invest in the kids and realize that potential. I am proud of the things that we have done as a board and the results that we have gotten as a school district, ranking in the 99th percentile of school districts across the state and the number one community unit school district in the state.

Find out more about Charles Cush:

[District Website](#)

[Campaign Website](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

Bill Eagan

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I’m a certified public accountant [and] certified management accountant. I worked in banking, I’ve worked in startups [and] I’m currently [a] Naperville Park District commissioner. I was on the board of Sunrise Rotary and treasurer there for five years. I was the treasurer of my [homeowner’s association] for about five years.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you’re elected?

First and foremost is to get kids back into school where they do their best learning [and] providing for choice. I’d like to make sure that we are spending money where we need to, driving out costs without compromising quality. I’d like to work on trying to close [achievement] gaps. We

know that the majority of children have fallen behind where they would normally be if we didn't have COVID.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

Into the first 90 days, I [would] give them a solid B plus; [they] pivoted quickly [and] dealt with the unknown. From June forward through today, it's a failing grade. I do not buy the board's argument that we have space limitations. Where's the creativity and the thought process? They didn't do that. They chose to sit back and take the facts. If we're afraid of the cooties, why are we not having [elementary school] kids come in for a full day? We're sending half the kids home, asking our janitorial staff to clean and prep for another set of kids to come in. Seems like a waste and lack of forethought to me.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

I think everybody should get vaccinated. I don't know if testing is the right way to go. If that's what we have to do to get kids back in school, okay, I'm all for it, but it comes down to personal responsibility and making sure that the parents understand that if there's COVID in the home, they need to stay home. In the private schools, they're not testing [at] large that I'm aware of. St. Peter and Paul [and] All Saints are all under 1% [COVID incidence rate], to my knowledge.* That means to me that people are doing the right thing.

**Editor's note: All Saints Catholic Academy and Saint Peter and Paul Catholic School do not publish information on COVID-19 rates publicly on their website. According to Margie Marshall, principal at All Saints, the school's COVID incidence rate is not below 1%.*

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

I think that's going to come through a discussion with the teachers. I don't know of any particular thing that I would wave my magic wand and fix right now. Maybe it's hiring some additional teachers for a year or two to help focus on those [learning] gaps, so that they have a little bit of a break.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed "Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year." Any thoughts?

It basically gives [the administration] the power to decide what's going to happen. [The current board said] 'we're gonna keep an eye and we'll step in if we have to.' They haven't stepped in. They shirk their responsibilities around keeping schools open.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

It comes down to education; if you don't know something, you have a natural fear [of it]. Everybody's equal. The message that has to come [is] no one group is superior over [another]. I think the world has become too guarded to have some of these conversations, because everybody's so afraid of being accused of something. We need to learn how to ask questions and ask them in a manner where they aren't necessarily perceived as being judgmental. That can come through education in the classroom.

On your Facebook page, you said whoever the board appoints to fill Janet Yang-Rohr's seat is a "patsy." What do you mean by that and how will you cooperate with that person if elected?

That person is plainly a patsy.* Why [didn't] Janet [Yang-Rohr resign] to let the electorate pick the person? [The current board] obviously thinks they could pick a better person than the voter. [The person is] going to be part of the echo chamber. The message is clear from everybody that the board is failing in handling COVID, [do] you think they're gonna pick somebody that can handle it better? If they're in the seat, we find compromise and something to agree on.

**Editor's note: this interview was conducted before the appointment of Anthony Casey by the current board on March 1.*

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

I think I bring a wealth of experience, not only from my various board positions, but the financial expertise. [A] well-rounded board has people from different areas. You've got somebody that's the finance accounting person, you need the legal legal, you need the salesperson, you need all these different, different things because we bring diversity. There [are] other considerations out there that in my experience, my training and the way my brain works I can bring forward.

Find out more about Bill Eagan:

[Facebook page](#)

[Campaign Website](#)

Christi Helm

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

My bachelor's degree is in sociology from Northern Illinois University. I also was an elementary school classroom teacher. I've done educational sales; I worked most recently for an educational nonprofit organization. I'm currently staying at home with my daughter.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you're elected?

Number one is what I'm coining "COVID catch up", things like helping students get back on track from all of the missed instructional time, helping students re-acclimate to school [and] making sure that students have services and supplemental programming that they need. [Also], my passion is educational equity. I want all students in District 203 to feel like they're in an inclusive

environment. I definitely have noticed some different policies and procedures at the district level, that are discriminatory towards lower income families. I kind of want to dig deep into those policies, and make sure [they] are fair for all of our families, regardless of any different demographics.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

I give them a lot of credit for everything that they've gone through the past nine months. I think that it was absolutely an impossible situation for anybody that would have been in that spot. Specifically as a single parent, I wish that the communication was more clear. As far as whether or not to open schools or not open schools, the solution for every family is going to look a little bit different. I wish that there was more of a choice for both students and teachers, because I would never want to force a teacher to go into a situation where they don't feel safe.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

To be honest with you, I'm not sure about the fall. For me, it just depends on the data over the next couple of months [and] the safety of the vaccine. Assuming that the data and statistics are showing us that it's safe, maybe it would be a good idea to require parents and parents of students to have that vaccination.

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

We need to make sure that we're listening to our teachers and [they] are well taken care of. That way, they can just focus on their jobs and take care of the students.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed "Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year." Any thoughts?

It was frustrating, because we voted in our school board members. I know that it was a very hard situation, but I think our school board members stepped up to serve that spot. They do need to take accountability for the decisions being made by the district.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

The number one thing for me is just making sure that our curriculum fosters diversity. Oftentimes, we look at history from one perspective, and I think that it's important to look at other people throughout history: people of color, women or people in the LGBTQ community. For both our students and our staff members, it's really important to [have] these conversations, about race or the social uprising that was happening over the summer. It's really important to have some of these hard conversations in a safe and inclusive way so that we're fostering our students to be calm.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

Ever since I first stepped into a classroom in kindergarten, I have been passionate about education. My experience in both education and sociology and my experience as a single mother [makes me] a very solid advocate for our students.

Find out more about Christi Helm:

[Facebook page](#)

Amanda McMillen

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

“I’m a social worker. I work in nonprofit management and have for the past 15 years. The nonprofit I work for is Illinois Collaboration on Youth. We are a statewide policy and advocacy organization for youth in child welfare, juvenile justice and homeless youth. I’ve been on a board of directors before for my kids’ preschool. I was head of the finance committee and vice president of that board of directors.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you’re elected?

As part of the board, it’s really important that we understand and anticipate the needs of the community and have resources in place so that our kids are able to focus, learn and thrive. We’re going to start seeing the effects of what COVID-19 has meant for families and children learning at home, in regards to mass unemployment and also the housing crisis, with people not being able to pay their mortgages. When those things happen, the place that most people turn for resources, whether it’s mental health services, social emotional services [or] food, is the school system. We have to understand, [for] those youth that maybe haven’t been able to engage electronically, how can we re-engage them? Those are some of the things that we have to plan strategically as a board by setting priorities and goals.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

I think that they’re doing the best that they can, and this is the first time we’ve ever gone through something like this. I have respect for the fact that they are really trying to put the safety of children and families and teachers and staff first. However, I also am a mom of three kids who are working remotely, and I also work. It is really challenging as a parent, and I understand how it impacts our kids. They’re depressed; they’re isolated. I think it’s important that parents have a choice [to have their children] stay remote, or if they choose, to come back. I wish they could have done a little bit earlier. But I definitely understand that these decisions aren’t made lightly.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

I am opposed to making any medical decisions mandatory. I believe this is a very important tool to ensure that all students and staff are safe within the in-school environment to help us return to full-time in-person faster; however, we have to respect peoples' right to make the best medical choices for themselves and their families.

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

I would like to have an opportunity to speak directly with the teachers and/or review anonymous survey information regarding the contributions to teacher fatigue. In my professional experience, providing appropriate supervision and support is one of the biggest contributors to staff retention. When staff feel heard and valued for their opinion, they are more likely to stay. I think this year has been especially difficult for teachers because they have been pulled in many directions with teaching both remotely and in-person, and I would explore options to have teachers focused on one or the other modalities as one example of support.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

I am going to compare this situation to nonprofits, which is my world. Nonprofits are also run by boards. The board's responsibility is to hire a CEO, approve and select a budget and set strategic plans and visions for the nonprofit. It is then up to the board to hold the CEO accountable for all the decisions in regards to who they hire. In this case, it parallels exactly. The role of the board [is] to hire the superintendent, trust that he is going to, with his team, make the best decisions, and help guide us through this unprecedented time of a global pandemic. At the time, from what we knew, I probably would have fallen in line with the same decision. Now in regards to all the decisions after that, I think that there are some things [that have] been done well, and I think there's things that we could do better, but that is why we have to learn and grow and revise.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

I know that the board has done some initiatives and around integrating a very intentional diversity and equity inclusion policy, which I think is a great step. They've hired Dr. Rakeda Leaks, who I think is a wonderful leader that this district desperately needs. I know that the teachers have gone through implicit bias training along substitutes. But I'm a firm believer that really being able to address the issues of racism [and] inclusion [has] to be done at every single level. If it's seen as a very normal part of our culture, of our education, how we talk about history, what kind of books we are reading to the kids in school, we know how to address [issues of race] and be able to stand up for what's right.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

I have the personal connection and professional experience, and I understand the issues. I'm a strategic thinker, and I know how to make things happen—get things done. In nonprofit management, I literally get paid to solve community issues, I've helped support organizations through state budget impasse, and now through COVID-19. I've had a lot of systemic training and insight. When it comes to supporting communities, schools and organizations, I understand how they work. I'm excited to take on this adventure, and I really hope that I get selected and [am] able to really serve this community through this major transition we're going through.

Find out more about Amanda McMillen:

[Campaign website](#)

[Facebook campaign page](#)

Rob Reed

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I'm the chief operations officer for the International Bank of Chicago. Previously, I was the anti-money-laundering officer for the bank, where I [worked] with state and federal agencies to prevent terrorists [and] drug, human, weapons and sex traffickers from using the financial system. I graduated in three years instead of four years of high school, I went to my undergrad at Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill., where I was able to capture a triple major in Finance, Economics and Business Administration. Ultimately, I ended up at the University of Notre Dame for my master's degree.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you're elected?

There are significant deficiencies in our infrastructure that have come to light. We have classrooms without doors on them [and] classrooms where you have to walk through classrooms to get to other classrooms. We need to work towards equity for all students to receive the best possible school experience they can. We're not seeing that right now. We were lucky we had a close to one-on-one device per student ratio. We have guidance coming down from the state on new education policies that are inconsistent [and] could be easily interpreted 100 different ways. This is where the board needs to step in and say, 'these are guidelines that we expect you to follow.'

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

There needs to be a change in leadership. We don't know what's going on. We just get shoved something in an email or in a board meeting, and we are just supposed to figure it out. We haven't heard from the teachers on this. You can't tell me we're at the same place we should have been if you guys were in school full time. Why can't we all have what we need right now? The only reason we can is because there's not a plan out there to do it. I think things are overly complicated that do not need to be. I would not put the open forum in the beginning of the

[meetings], because unfortunately you have a lot of people going up there, screaming, complaining and upset. You have to get people to stay for the front of the meeting, which [has] the information that needs to get out to them. I would not have returned the \$10 million, I would have utilized it to figure out these challenges with the buildings and what the administration needs.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

I actually think [surveillance tests] should be implemented across the board. I think that's going to make more people feel safer to bring their kids in [and] make the teachers feel safer as well. We also need to make sure that the records and the administration portion of that is accurate. I'm not against mandatory vaccination, but the state is going to overrule anything the board is going to say on that.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

My understanding was that [the] board resolution to provide transfer of temporary power was not needed. In their minds they did this to be more transparent as to what was going on, [but] in our minds we see [power] being transferred. The way I read the policy is that the board is there to help provide guidance; the superintendent is there to implement. Why give up your guidance at this point in time?

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

There has to be consequences [for] the actions of children. By allowing students to get away with no consequences, we're not teaching them proper life lessons that are going to help them get through life and be successful. The education that my kids have received as far as social awareness has been pretty good. They're aware of these things and they're in fourth and sixth grade. The education piece of it is pretty good; the consequence piece of it is not.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

People should vote for me because I'll be honest with them. I don't feel the need to hide. I'm going to listen to everybody's perspective and try to do what's best across the board for the kids. My whole goal in coming here was to provide the best education that I could for them. I'm seeing the struggle, the toll taken on kids, teachers [and] parents. We can make it better if we work differently.

Find out more about Rob Reed:

[Campaign Website](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

Adam Russo

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I'm a licensed clinical social worker. I have about 20 years of experience working with kids and families, [with] my own practice here in Naperville. For the past 5-10 years, [I] have been active with District 203 and other school districts doing training [and] presentations for kids, parents and administrators about intangible skills that lead to success into adulthood. I [chaired] the Naperville Chamber of Commerce board for about six years.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you're elected?

I felt like schools didn't focus on [intangible trades]: someone's ability to adapt, someone's ability to be decisive [and] adaptive reliability as much as maybe they could have. We're too worried about what grades are going to look like, not [worrying] about being confident—making a decision and then adapting if we're wrong. Systems try to support [kids] so much that we don't allow [them] the opportunity to adapt, because we want to make sure they don't have to adapt in the first place, that everything is always under control. I know District 203, with the development of their SEL curriculum has been doing really well with it. That's just been a piece that I've always wanted to be more invested in. With the pandemic, what's been really frustrating to me is that it seems like most kids have been treated the same over the past 10 months, and there hasn't been a choice about what they need as far as in-person classes or not. I would want to see more parent choice and teacher choice whether it's returning, teaching remotely, being in the classroom, remotely coming to school in-person or teaching them in person

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

It's frustrating. I feel like in 10 months, the ball just hasn't moved forward. It just seems like nothing has really been tried. The communication hasn't been great. It's surprising to me that there hasn't been more of an effort to get those kids back to school, because that's what the majority of the community wants. I would like to understand why public and private schools can be open while others stay closed. I don't understand. So if there were investments that we can make now, that would prevent this from happening going forward, I would rather do that as a parent with three kids in the district than get the [tax] rebate.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

No way. If you mandate that, what's next? I think everything should be about family choice and decisions. To me, it goes to a civil liberty point. We lose 25 to 80 thousand people a year for the flu.* Why not mandate the flu vaccine?

Editor's note: The **CDC reports that since 2010, 12,000-61,000 Americans die from the flu annually.*

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

I've presented and worked with many teachers over the years in various communities. If there's been a consistent response from them, it's been that they would prefer to have more autonomy in their classroom and not feel like they are so administratively burdened. I would start by looking at what can be removed from their plates so that they can focus on doing the job they love, which is teaching.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

At the time, I agreed with it. Things were changing so unpredictably, it made sense to have one point of contact to be responsible. It didn't seem like anything moved any faster, so I'm not totally sure what the point was.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

Universal respect and decency always [have] to be encouraged. No one wants prejudice, discrimination [or] racism, [but] are you ever really going to get rid of it? My belief is no, you're not, no matter how hard you try. I think kids get on each other. Sometimes it's in jest, sometimes it's meant to be offensive. I would rather also teach kids how to really feel empowered to handle themselves in situations that create those difficulties.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

[I] bring a different lens to schools and I really don't have a problem asking difficult questions. I think parents want leadership on board; they want somebody who's going to advocate the best interests of the kids, which is what I've been doing for the past 20 years. I want to continue to do it, even if it makes a lot of adults angry.

Find out more about Adam Russo:

[Facebook page](#)

[Campaign Website](#)

Donna Wandke

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I am Chief of Staff for [Illinois Rep.] Janet Yang Rohr, which is a legislative position that I just started in January. I started as a math teacher at Naperville North. When I had my third son, I stopped teaching and took a little bit of time to stay home and did a lot of volunteering in their schools. My position on the board is vice president. I've been on the board since 2013.

What prior experience do you have on the Board of Education?

I was recognized in Bloomington, Illinois, from the Illinois State Board of Education for my work as a school board member. I have that master school board member [award] from [the Illinois Association of School Boards]. In the eight years that I've been on the board, we've returned \$32.7 million to taxpayers based on the decisions that we've made. We have the highest number of exemplary [K-12] schools in the state. That has a lot to do with the goals that we set for the superintendent: [all day kindergarten, expanded early childhood services and making sure that summer school was expanded] and how we move those forward. We have a nationally-recognized social emotional learning program, which is super exciting. There are school districts all over the country that are asking our team of administrators to come and speak on what we're doing as far as social emotional learning goes.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you're elected?

My biggest concern going forward is making sure that we have an environment that educates our students without compromising anyone's health. Something that we have to continually [work on is] looking at metrics and data, not just in relation to COVID, but the metrics and data related to student engagement, grades and accomplishments. My other goals have not changed that because they continue to evolve. One of them is making sure that I am transparent and communicate to the community as best I can. I also think that it's my job as a board member to be a good financial steward.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

I think that the plan has always been very detailed. Every time I've asked a question, the administration definitely has responses and has thought through everything. I'm oversight; it's their job to implement the actual plan. I'm not disappointed in that at all. What I am disappointed in is the fact that there have been unforeseen circumstances that caused us to have to shift gears at the last minute. I remember that cross country practice [in October]. We get a note from the DuPage County Health Department recommending that we all go into full remote learning. We were due to go back into hybrid starting with the younger kids the next day. It really upset the community, but it's not like the board or the administration [did] that out of disrespect. We're in the middle of a pandemic; we have to be fluid and able to move with whatever the experts in the field [are] telling us. In fact, we didn't go fully remote. There [was] some leeway for students with special needs or students who were also struggling.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

I'm not going to take making [testing] mandatory off the table; I'm going to listen to the recommendations of the health department and our administration as to if they think they need to do that. As far as requiring the vaccine, it always comes down from state mandatory law and [the] department of health.

If re-elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

We actually have a good number of teachers that apply for any position. That being said, the teachers and the staff we have right now are quality staff that I hope we retain. They've had lots of new initiatives all at once: they've got the block schedule, they all had to go remote [and] now they're doing live streaming, like those are all huge things for them to adapt to. And so I just want to make sure that we have resources available to them.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

With or without a relative resolution, the Illinois State Board of Education gave the superintendent that power. If we somehow created some policy [to hinder] that, it would slow things down drastically, because you have the presentation of whatever we're changing, then we talk about it, then you have to wait two weeks, they have another presentation of it and then we vote on it. Do you know how much that plan changes in two weeks? It would just continue; we never would vote on it. The accountability that the superintendent and the administration has been held to has been much higher on this than anything else. I know the community thinks what they think, but how many times do we spend 10 months talking about a plan and getting all the details and every question out?

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

While I've been on the board, I've been very supportive of hiring our new Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Dr. Rakeda Leaks. She's amazing. [However], because we've hired her, there's room to improve [in this area]. I would continue to support her and her efforts, and if we need to increase staff there, I would support that as well.

You've recently been hired by former board member and newly elected Illinois House of Representatives member Janet Yang-Rohr to be her chief of staff. Is there a conflict of interest?

Superintendent Bridges checked with our district lawyer [and] with the Illinois Association of School Boards lawyer, and there's no conflict of interest. It's just not an issue. We work with legislators all the time. I work in a legislative role, it's not a political role in any way. We do ethics training, where you can't in your job do any kind of political activity for your representative.

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

We're in a time of crisis, and I think it's important to have some continuity and experience. I have a lot of experience, I have a lot of knowledge [and] I have a lot of passion for education. Everything I do revolves around what's best for students. I'm trying to be a mentor to my colleagues as well and help them.

Find out more about Donna Wandke:[District Website](#)[Campaign Website](#)[Facebook Page](#)

Kristin Fitzgerald

Introduce yourself. What do you do?

I am a former education and health policy advisor. I am currently not working and am dedicating my time as a school board member and just as a community volunteer. I'm a widow; my husband passed away from cancer. Something that I have been very involved with is advocating for congressional funding for very underfunded cancer.

What prior experience do you have on the Board of Education?

I am very proud that we are the community unit school district with the highest number of exemplary schools in the state of Illinois. I think a huge part of that is the work that we've done to close achievement gaps. The board and the district committed to a \$2 million annual investment in closing achievement gaps, which has made great progress. We have increased the number of students served by our early childhood program, increased the students served by our summer school program and invested in ensuring that students who are low income have the resources to go to summer school.

What do you hope is accomplished by the board if you're elected?

We are prioritizing [executing] our Return to Learn safely. We continue to really focus on developing \$5 million dollars in extra programming that will assist students with academic, social and emotional needs resulting from the pandemic. We're looking at potential summer boot camps or a jumpstart program right before school.

What are your thoughts on the current district COVID-19 response? What is going well? What would you change?

As we were starting "Return to Learn," there was very little data; as we were making those initial decisions, our community transmission rates were unpredictable. I think we've done the best job that we can to prioritize returning to learn safely for our students and staff, [and ensure] that we're able to implement [state and local health department] guidance. An area where we're really wanting to work is to communicate our message, whether it's the factors in our decision making or ensuring that our families, parents, educators and students understand how much their incredibly hard work in this pandemic is valued.

Are you in support of mandatory COVID testing or a mandatory COVID vaccine requirement from the state for students to learn in-person next fall? (Aside from medical or other exemptions?)

In terms of the vaccine, the authority that mandates is the state. In terms of testing we have about 53% who have signed up for the testing.* One of the things we're looking at is our rates. How successful are we being in terms of positivity and spread? I think we'll continue to navigate those circumstances as they come.

**Editor's note: reflects surveillance test participation rates as of the Feb. 1 Board meeting. Between Feb. 1 and Feb. 22, the number of individuals who participated in the district fell from 2514 to 1723.*

If elected, how do you think the board would address issues with teacher fatigue and excess teacher turnover?

Part of that is professional learning, ensuring that you are offering the support that people need. We'll continue to meet those challenges as they come. If there's a need for additional support, [we're] committed to meeting those needs.

During the Aug. 17 meeting, the current board passed “Resolution affirming the authority of the superintendent to implement Return to Learn plan for 2020-2021 school year.” Any thoughts?

The superintendent, being the operational leader, is able to make timely decisions. When he is working through plans, programs and procedures specifically recognized in our policy, he and his qualified staff are the ones developing those plans. It was perceived as a departure from normal procedure, rather than an affirmation of normal procedure. The board always retains the authority and responsibility to evaluate the superintendent. The resolution doesn't change that.

How can we as a district address issues regarding racism, bias, diversity, equity and inclusion?

[Over the summer], we passed a board and district resolution reaffirming our commitment to overcoming systemic racism and achieving equity for all students. That resolution was lauded by our state superintendent of schools, not just for the work that we've done on closing achievement gaps, looking at equity issues and making these commitments, but also for recognizing we have a lot of areas where we need to make progress. For efforts to be anti-racist, we need to hear students' voices. We have been working with the Midwest Center for Equity in looking at our curriculum, working with our teachers to say, 'how do we look at it with all these different lenses, and have a curricular product that is representative?'

One last thing: why should people vote for you?

My goals were to help our students achieve, to really prioritize that aspect of closing achievement gaps and helping all students achieve their potential as well as responsibly looking at our budget to ensure that we can best serve our students but keep our taxpayer burden low. I am hopeful that I am able to continue advocating on behalf of our students, and as we come out of the pandemic, keep making progress.

Find out more about Kristin Fitzgerald

Campaign Website
District Website
Facebook Page

Several Central staff members repeatedly unmask around students

March 26, 2021

A majority of students and staff at Naperville Central have welcomed the opportunity to participate in hybrid in-person learning since the beginning of second semester on Jan. 26. But many have also expressed concerns about their health and safety because of a small number of staff who consistently don't wear their masks around students.

Thus far, Central Times was able to independently confirm incidents where five separate teachers have taken their masks off at least once for several minutes while students were in their classrooms. Central Times also reached out to several of these teachers, who declined to comment.

Because all but one are members of the physical education department, Central Times also reached out to PE department chair Neil Duncan.

"If there is a concern, I think it is appropriate to have students or staff talk directly with each other," Duncan wrote in response to an interview request, which he declined. "I would rather... the students who are feeling uncomfortable come see me, and let's work together to create a solution."

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) **recommends** the "consistent and correct use of masks in all public settings, including schools." The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) **requires** that "all persons... must wear a face mask at all times when in school or in transit to and from school via group conveyance, unless a specific exemption applies." A study published in the journal **Nature** concluded that "universal mask use could [have saved] an additional 129,574 lives from Sept. 22, 2020 through the end of February 2021."

For a few of the teachers that have unmasked around their students, the incidents are regular occurrences which coincide with the teachers not maintaining a proper social distance either.

"As I'm sitting there, he takes his mask off to talk to everyone on Zoom," said junior Liam Crider, who, because of medical issues, had to sit on a chair within six feet of his teacher. "That was [about] six minutes of him not wearing it."

Crider says that his teacher will commonly have his mask off for a total of 9-10 minutes per class period, and that this behavior had occurred at least six times as of Feb. 10. He suspects that the teacher doesn't think students can hear with him while masked, though the teacher has never explicitly provided an explanation.

“It doesn’t really make sense because we can hear [him] perfectly fine,” Crider said.

For freshman Madeline Brook, her teacher’s unmasking habits are even more perplexing. The teacher will usually have her mask off for a total of 15-20 minutes every class period and often gets within two feet of her students. The CDC defines a close contact as someone who was within six feet of an infected person for at least 15 cumulative minutes in a day.

“When I’m in person, she starts off...talking on Zoom, and she wears her mask for that,” Brook said. “Then she comes over to the in-person kids, and she takes it down to talk to us. She comes really close when giving instructions.”

Most concerned students are uncomfortable directly communicating with their teachers about their masking habits.

“I don’t want to appear to be disrespectful,” Crider said. “I know that it isn’t, but in the back of my head, I’m thinking that it is.”

Other students who spoke to their teachers about the unsafe learning environment have been promptly ignored.

“There was one girl who mentioned it to [the teacher],” Brook said. “She just said ‘sorry,’ and [it] went under the rug.”

Because most students don’t report these incidents and those that do have been ignored, school administrators are mostly unaware of this behavior. Though a staff member took their students’ concerns about other teachers to school administrators on Feb. 1, Principal Bill Wiesbrook said the first he had heard of such an incident was through an anonymous tip about two weeks ago.

“I forwarded that to the department chair and said, ‘I don’t know anything about this [or] if it’s true or false, but can you look into and address this?’” Wiesbrook said. “I haven’t heard anything back since.”

Regardless, according to Wiesbrook, the administration aims to address the issue of staff members unmasking around their students.

“I’m disappointed and frustrated,” he said. “Safety procedures that we’ve been broadcasting and enforcing for everybody should be modeled consistently by [staff]. I can understand how a student or staff member who’s not a supervisor would be uncomfortable addressing [these issues]. Sharing that with someone like me or a supervisor would be the right step to take.”

IHSA strips football program of past 3 seasons' wins

May 27, 2021

The Illinois High School Association, which governs interscholastic athletics and activities in the state, has levied sanctions against the Naperville Central football team for violating association by-laws regarding athlete transfers.

IHSA Executive Director Craig Anderson says Central violated **section 3.041** of the IHSA bylaws, which requires the principals of both schools to sign off on a concurrence form of transfer when a student athlete migrates from one school and team to another as a result of a change in residence. This process must be initiated by the “receiving” school, but Central failed to do so for a number of students. The IHSA has determined that at least five ineligible players regularly competed for the Redhawks during the last three seasons.

“Had the concurrence forms been completed, a number of things would have been pointed out, [like] concerns from the sending school, that would have necessitated a ruling from our office,” Anderson said. “Additionally, we believe that there were some students ... competing that didn’t meet the residence bylaw.”

The residence bylaws, outlined in section 3.03 of the IHSA bylaws, requires an eligible student to have lived full time in the boundaries of a school with a legal guardian. The student athlete must also have attended that school or district for a period of time before they become eligible to play, the specific length of which depends on their circumstance.

Naperville District 203 launched an internal investigation into these violations on April 19 and issued a **press release** on May 26 acknowledging that “the violations have resulted in the forfeiture of Naperville Central High School football games encompassing all wins in the 2018-19, 19-20 and 20-21 seasons, totaling 17 competitions in which ineligible players participated. At least one ineligible player competed in basketball games during the 18-19 season resulting in an additional 4 forfeited games.”

The district’s internal investigation was prompted by concerns brought up by a fellow DuPage Valley Conference school to the IHSA and Naperville Central administration early in this year’s spring football season about a recently transferred student playing against his former team.

“We got confirmation from Naperville Central administration that in fact the student hadn’t completed a concurrence form,” Anderson said. “At that point, I deemed that particular student ineligible, [and] had the school forfeit the contest that that student had played in.

“When that ruling was sent back to the school, I think it created an awareness within the district that ‘maybe we should check into... some of these other transfer students.’”

Anderson says that the violated bylaws regarding athlete residence, transfers and eligibility are created by member schools in students’ best interests.

“Our membership has established a position that it’s in the students best interest academically and in extracurriculars to start and finish at the same high school,” he said. “So there’s some preventative bylaws to encourage students to start and finish their high school careers at the same high school. It’s educationally sound.”

Central Times reached out to principal Bill Wiesbrook, who, along with other district administrators, has declined to comment because of the ongoing nature of this investigation.

Superintendent Dan Bridges, in the district press release, called the violations “unacceptable,” adding: “Naperville 203 and Naperville Central High School assume full responsibility for the errors and the subsequent punishment outlined by IHSA. We apologize for the negative impact on the student-athletes, families, and community.”

Central Times will continue to update this story as it develops.