

Community Unit School District 203 “Virtual” Candidate Forum



The April 6th election will include 9 candidates: Kristin W. Fitzgerald, Donna E. Wandke, Amanda McMillen, Charles Cush, Christi Helm, Thomas Andrew Binkowski, Robert M. Reed, Adam Russo, and

William Bernard Eagan, III; seeking one of the four open seats on the District 203 Board of Education. In an effort to better know and understand those running for this important office, the Confederation reached out to these candidates and asked that they provide a written answer to a single question. Just as in our traditional candidate forums, the responses of the candidates would be limited to a set amount (in this case 250 words), managed at the discretion of the Confederation. The question we asked the candidates was:

Given recent national movements and events, curriculum mandates from the state, and the uneven impact of remote instruction, what areas should District 203 schools focus on moving forward? What changes or initiatives would you advocate or support?

Amanda McMillen: The priority once we can go back to some level of normality with the majority of students back to in-person for the length of a pre-COVID school day is to assess the academic and social-emotional needs of students so that we can dedicate the resources to close any achievement gaps and/or social anxieties experienced by students. Additionally, if there is a need to continue remote learning, especially for students and/or families that are immuno-compromised, we need to ensure they have teachers dedicated to focusing on the engagement and learning of those students in a full-time capacity. I do not feel the block scheduling for remote learners, especially those in elementary, is sufficient.



Additionally, I also believe it is very important to continue to support and enhance the training for teachers, staff, and board members on diversity, equity, and inclusion within the school setting. I support curricular adaptations to include more representation of different cultures and experiences in the areas of history, social studies, literature, and arts. I also support highlighting more cultural awareness events to celebrate the beautifully rich community Naperville represents. I believe education is key to helping increase awareness, empathy, and understanding. This is key to closing the achievement gap in District 203 and ensure that all students can reach their full potential.

Donna Wandke: As a board member, I supported the hiring of our Director of Equity and Inclusion. She worked closely with experts, our community and a committee to develop a Comprehensive Equity Plan with goals through the year 2023. The goals speak to academics, climate and culture of our buildings. We will continue to address academic objectives to close achievement gaps. A unit district has the advantage of developing continuity across curriculum that focuses on the growth of students. Beyond our Illinois Standards, curriculum is something that should be decided at the local level. I am closely watching a number of legislative bills that would create more unfunded mandates from the State of Illinois and advocating with our elected state officials to maintain curriculum decisions at the district level. The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult for all of us, but especially students. The board governs from a perspective of addressing students' needs while maximizing their time in school and not compromising their health and safety. Our focus every week moving forward is to return more students into the classroom while



allowing choice. Another of my priorities is to balance the budget with the growing concerns from our taxpayers. I have worked diligently over eight years to save our taxpayers \$32.7 million dollars including a recent \$10 million reimbursement. This has all been achieved while maintaining high quality education. In fact, we have the highest number of exemplary schools for any unit district in Illinois.

Kristin Fitzgerald: The pandemic has been challenging for students, parents, teachers and our whole community. Providing a safe in person learning environment for students and staff, increasing the amount of in person time safely and meeting students' academic and social and emotional needs resulting from the pandemic are my top priorities as we progress through this school year and into next year. To provide this support, we are developing additional programming for the summer, next school year and beyond.



Beginning in 2017, the Board committed to accelerating student growth by dedicating a \$2 million annual investment toward closing academic achievement gaps. This initiative, along with our efforts to strengthen social and emotional learning and serve more students in early childhood and summer school, has resulted in District 203 attaining the highest number of exemplary schools in Illinois. Closing achievement gaps must continue to be one of our top priorities.

This summer, our Board passed a Resolution, lauded by our State Superintendent, that affirmed our commitment to systemic review of our policies, practices, programs, curricula and culture to ensure a district culture that is inclusive and achieves equity for all students. I believe this work is essential to fully achieve our District 203 mission for all students.

As a Board Member, I have dedicated myself to advocating for the success of all students and providing the leadership necessary for us to overcome the pandemic challenges and continue these essential initiatives to ensure student success. I hope to have your support. www.electfitzgerald.com

Andrew Binkowski: The negative impact of remote learning on the academic achievement and social development of our children is undeniable. The District needs to perform “academic triage” to rapidly identify the learning loss and provide supplementary educational opportunities and programs to get every student at or above grade level for the 2021-2022 school year. Whether through comprehensive summer school programs, bridge courses, boot camps, or workshops, the District needs to plan and act now.



Every student in Naperville has the right to a world-class education, but no family should have to jeopardize their beliefs or choose between their student's safety and their education. The District should not require any family to take on more risk than they are comfortable with or have to convince them what is safe and effective for their student's education. A rigorous academic curriculum with proven pedagogy should be provided across all educational models. Equitable Remote, Hybrid, and In-Person learning options should be offered to students of all levels and all abilities. Social emotional learning goals should be updated to meet the needs of students participating in each model.

This past year, communication to faculty, staff, parents, and students has been inconsistent, confusing, and inauthentic. The District needs to be sincere in thought, action, and communication and engage cooperatively on the issues that are impacting our community. The Board of Education is supposed to be the voice of the community, but that does not mean that they should not be listening.

Charles Cush: I think the greatest challenge is to ensure that we collectively come out of this period in our history better than we were before going into the pandemic; getting to a place where as a community can align on what is important and avoid the finger pointing and name calling that has arisen. I for one think that we owe each other better than that, and we need to display a bit more empathy for the variety of needs and circumstances that exist in this community. Our district can and must play a pivotal role in helping the broader community heal from the social-emotional effects of this pandemic, rebuilding the bridges that have been damaged by social distance, and recognizing that we all do better when we ALL do better. My key focus areas will continue to be:



1. Student Growth- Ensuring that we are meeting the needs of ALL students, giving each their best chance to succeed. This includes extra support needed for students and families given the impact of the pandemic; and ensuring that our teachers and staff have the resources and tools needed to support the students
2. College & Career Readiness- Providing students with the skills they will need to succeed at the next stage in life; whether that is attending college or immediately entering the workforce. Helping students transition to new ways of working.
3. Financial Stewardship- Maintaining a responsible approach to district spending, driving maximum results for the investments that we are making in our students and schools.

Bill Egan: Free and Appropriate Education is foundational to our way of life. Our children have drastically fallen behind as a result of E-Learning, the achievement gap in less fortunate students has widened. I would have advocated to utilize the \$10mm that the district is returning on education. How many teachers could have \$10mm hired to close the achievement gap and bring our children closer to where they would be in “normal” times.



If elected, my primary initiative would be to open and schools and allow for parental choice. We need to allow for waivers and parent choice for children entering the PI program. There are children that are within the relevant range and writing their own appeal letters, but are being denied.

We need to ensure every child has opportunity, and are taught to think critically

Robert Reed: District 203 needs to explore deficiencies in infrastructure that have come to light as a significant limitation to in-person learning. Of course, buildings are not set up for a pandemic. However, there are limitations in many schools that have contributed to the problems of allowing students to attend in-person. Schools without doors on classrooms, shortcomings in ventilation systems and buildings too small to accommodate the growing populations are the result of the school district not prioritizing infrastructure projects. There also needs to be a focus on how instruction, policy, and procedures are applied across the board to ensure equity in education for all. The Board has not focused on these weaknesses which left us vulnerable to these issues. I would focus my efforts in ensuring our success for the future.



Adam Russo: D203 should first focus on getting kids back in school for full, in-person instruction. That is without question the primary focus as the academic, social, and emotional consequences have been enormous for the age group least affected by COVID. Further, remote learning does not create an equitable learning environment for all students, and the only way to ensure equity in education is to have full, in person learning.



The other main initiative I support is continuing to push SEL (*editor's note: Social and emotional learning*) in school. Many studies show that the most successful adults (regardless of profession), involve high levels of emotional intelligence more so than grades, college attended, and SAT scores. I would want SEL to carry just as much weight in how the district evaluates itself as those objective criteria. My website is <https://arussoford203.com>

Christi Helm: I strongly believe that District 203 must continue working towards providing an equitable education for all students. At this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students are returning to classrooms. However, some students are remaining fully remote. It is important for the District to take the needs of all learners into consideration so none of our kids get left behind.



Additionally, the District must work hard to look at the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the achievement gap by race and class. We must ensure that the gaps are not widening due to the pandemic and implement evidence-based solutions to close these gaps. The District needs to provide supplemental resources for students to account for the learning loss due to the pandemic.

Furthermore, the District needs to work on expanding mental health services. The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on all of us, but it's been especially hard on our kids. The District must take this into account and ensure that our students have the support they need at school. We need to evaluate student-to-staff ratios and have check-ins with students as they are phasing back into school. The District must also make sure that the services are easily accessible to students, so all students have the opportunity to receive help. This is especially important for students who may not have the ability to access such resources outside of school.