

## Q & A for FISD Board-member Candidates – Organized by Question

### 1. Why are you running for FISD School Board?

- **Erin Carter:** I am running for a spot on the FISD School Board because I feel like I have a tremendous amount of knowledge to bring to the board. I have insight into the pulse of the staff and how they have struggled with leadership for the last five plus years. Morale is low but I know we can turn that around with positive leadership that is supportive, kind and genuinely honest. A district is as strong as its leader and it is essential that a new superintendent be evaluated with rigor and held to the same standards as we do our teachers.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** Thank you for voting on FISD School Board. I am running for FISD School Board because I am intrinsically motivated to support teachers, students, and parents. I have three children that have been in the district since kindergarten—Ross 6<sup>th</sup>, Mark 9<sup>th</sup>, and Luke 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Twelve years ago, I started to see and hear challenges and wanted the opportunity to make a difference. In the beginning, this was volunteering at FES. This grew to being the FMS PTO President for 2 years which ultimately led to me running for FISD Board of Trustees three years ago. I am running because I want to help all students be their best and take our district to the next level by continuously improving.

- **Judge Edwards:** Many reasons, but to boil it down, Student Outcome is number one. The kids deserve a great start in life, and it takes well respected, and taken care of staff, and taxpayers to get it done. I got elected to be a part of governing what I see as a very important piece of our community that involves everyone in the district. It was an honor to do so and I would like to continue serving FISD.

### 2. What are your qualifications and availability to be a School Board member?

- **Erin Carter:** My qualifications for the school board is my career. I retired in June of 2020 and had previously worked at the FISD Central Office for 17 years. Prior to that I taught in FISD and other school districts throughout this great state. I have worked on every campus and with about every administrator and teacher before I ended my career. I understand how the inner workings of a school district and how important leadership is when it comes to supporting the teachers, staff and students. Availability for a board member is important because you want to be able to answer questions when someone asks, have the time to research and learn any new legislative items that come from new policies and be familiar with the federal guidelines we must follow. I think retirement has allowed me to take on this task.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** I have been a committed board member for three years and am seeking reelection. There is a lot to learn coming on to the FISD School Board, and I have spent the last three years learning and understanding. This allows me to come back into the role with and make even more significant contributions. I value education. I hold a BS in Management and Master's degree in Human Resource Development from Clemson University and an MBA from University of South Florida. With this, I am an employee and small business owner, and I understand the talents and skills needed for the future. I also come from a family of educators. My mom was an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and my mother-in-law taught English at FMS and retired from FISD. I have listened to the needs of past and current teachers. As your elected representative, I seek to understand every one of the texts, emails and calls that I receive from concerned parents, teachers, staff and students. I seek information, context, and background and in turn have a voice in meetings on behalf of those students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

- **Judge Edwards:** As it relates to being a part of the community, I am a tax payor, I was a student of the district, and my kids will be students in the district when they are in High School. As it relates to my career background, I currently own and operate a business that consists of multiple businesses in the hospitality industry. In particular, they are the food & beverage part of the hospitality. I am still learning after all of these years, but I think I have made some solid decisions so far. Further, I worked at the Texas state legislature as a leader, and I learned how school finance works. I also have experience and a track record in public policy development in including public school matters.

### 3. What is your familiarity and experience with the schools, its people and past/present issues?

- **Erin Carter:** I am remarkably familiar with the schools because of my job. I was the Special Education Coordinator for 17 years in FISD. I worked with teachers, students, staff and other administrators daily to help our special population. I have guided many families in this town through the process of Special Education Services and have absolutely loved every minute of showcasing our wonderful teachers and programs. I think I have a unique perspective because I have witnessed an exceptional superintendent and have gone through ones that have caused real issues within our district, so I know I have a good handle of each department and school.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** I have been actively involved with FISD for over 12 years. With this, I have supported this district in multiple capacities learning along the way about school finance/finance reform, special education, curriculum and instruction, extra curriculars, CTE classes, facilities/cleaning, food services, transportation, and technology. I am a voice of concern, support, and change. Those who know me personally know that I will challenge the status quo. I am active in meetings and take a stand on what is right.

- **Judge Edwards:** I am a Trustee on the FISD School Board, so I am very familiar with FISD. As for experience, my wife and I are both natives of Fredericksburg, and I attended all campuses in the district as a student. Further, my mom taught in the district for over thirty years.

### 4. What improvements would you like to see in the school board, the school system and operations?

- **Erin Carter:** First, I understand what it is like living on a teacher's salary and knowing that 40\$ or 100\$ extra dollars on your monthly paycheck means you can pay a bill. We live in one of the most expensive places in Texas now and I would like to see our teachers being paid fairly. They are paid under base salaries for the state of Texas according to our last TAPR report which needs to be addressed soon for the new budget year. I know we are looking at other comparable school districts, but I am not sure the cost of living is comparable. Second, I want better communication from the top down because of the previous leadership we now have schools functioning as their own islands, following their own set of rules and policies. Parents are frustrated and I know teachers and staff feel the same. We need a leader that can make decisions and sometimes hard ones. Lastly, I want to ensure our district that we can be fiscally responsible. I know from my view point we have hired positions in the last few years that really need to be analyzed to see if they are a benefit to FISD.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** Communication comes in two forms-informal and formal. I feel I have great informal channels from teachers, parents and students. There is not a day that goes by that I don't hear about a challenge or opportunity for the district. My concern is those who are afraid to voice. I would like to see as part of our communication strategy a formalized method whereby all constituents could share feedback. At a systemic level, I would like us to focus on consistency across campuses on everything from discipline to dress code, level of facilities to communication. I would like to see more time teaching and less time doing paperwork.

- **Judge Edwards:** I am looking forward to a change at the middle school for one. It is outdated. It has served us well, but it is clearly a time for change. Another is teacher pay. Their jobs are extremely important, and they deserve to be paid more. We are doing the best we can to get them there, but Legislature is going to have to act. They don't need to stick another band aid on it, they need to overhaul the funding system. I am also not a fan of standardized testing and all of the other time-consuming reporting required of school districts by the State.

### 5. Is there a problem with maintaining traditional conduct and curriculum in our public schools?

- **Erin Carter:** There are certain aspects to a traditional curriculum that are necessary in our schools, but I also think we need more project-based learning curriculums like our building trades, engineering, agriculture and health classes we have right now. Texas moved away from Vocational Learning in the late 1990s and hopefully we are moving to the understanding that not all kids go to college.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** There should be a larger focus on learning and less on test taking. I would like to see teachers have some flexibility to bring in topics of interest and expertise. For conduct, I would like to see us follow restorative discipline. Have the punishment match the crime and most importantly be a learning moment for the children. Consider the whole child in conduct issues.

- **Judge Edwards:** I don't think so, but I am still learning the process. These kids and our teachers are conducting them self well and doing it in a way that really works great for learning. There are of course some behavior issues from time to time, but in general FUSD is amazing. As for curriculum, from what I see, the only thing non traditional is the rigor of the material. We ask a lot out of the kids these days and they respond well to it. Also, we have an excellent Assistant superintendent in charge of C&I, and I trust her and what she is doing. There is always room for growth, but in general FUSD is in great shape.

#### **6. What makes for a good teacher, beneficial curriculum and school activities?**

- **Erin Carter:** A good teacher is one that has a knowledge base for what they teach, plan lessons to engage their students, can navigate the ever-changing classrooms, teach to all the students and be a team player in planning. These all are a lot individually but collectively they are impossible without leadership and guidance from the district administrators. The assistant Superintendent of Curriculum is the person that needs to guide each of our schools with alignment that corresponds to the TEKS. A scope and sequence of our curriculum is a great place to start in the core subject areas with input from each school personal. Also, teachers and staff need to feel supported in working with their special populations and how to handle teaching to the most challenging child to a child that learns at a higher level and every child in-between. Teachers take on other roles such as teaching/coaching student activities that range from our Bass Club, athletics, drama, agriculture competitions, UIL, art competitions, tiny houses but I feel these need to be better highlighted to our community. We have wonderful talented students that may not be athletic but have accomplished amazing things with the support of good teachers and volunteers.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** A good teacher is a teacher that connects with students. I am a firm believer that we excel when we believe the person we are working with really cares about our success. The student becomes motivated because the teacher is motivated. A beneficial curriculum is one that balances standards with flexibility. School activities are a must. You don't get a grade for soft skills like teamwork, leadership, preparation, and relationship building, etc. Extracurriculars build well rounded students beyond what is learned in the classroom.

- **Judge Edwards:** As for a good teacher, I try to focus on character. As a board member, I am looking for a person with strong character. They need to have the values of the community and be honest. As a board member, I try to stay at 30,000 feet and let the pro's handle their business but I do ask questions and as I understand it, our teachers like curriculum that they develop, not curriculum that is dictated to them. As for school activities, the many programs we offer are excellent, and what makes the programs work are the incredible teachers and other staff administering them. Whether it be sports, ag, ROTC and on and on, these programs help kids to be ready and interested in the next step in life.

#### **7. What is the school's role with respect to areas like prep for college, the working world, citizenship or life skills?**

- **Erin Carter:** FUSD needs to be instrumental in the role of college, vocational school, training for the real world. I believe that can begin at the elementary level with exploration and awareness. Life skills is essential for our students moving forward and navigating this world and we as a district can and should support that curriculum.

- **Kelly DiCuffa:** Public school is the foundation for a child's future. In ideal cases, the school is a foundation to launch into their post-graduation plans. With this, the school should provide the skills, knowledge, and abilities for students to follow their dreams-military, community college, college or skilled careers. Additionally, I support the addition of life skills such as test taking skill and personal finance into every curriculum.

- **Judge Edwards:** As I said earlier, Student Outcome is number #1. We need to have them ready for anything you stated above but let's not forget military. In essence, it is our role to be a major player in their pursuit of the next step.

## 8. What do you believe are the 3 most important issues for Fredericksburg ISD?

### - Erin Carter:

- An important issue facing FISD right now is navigating recoupment for students and staff that have lost any ground during the pandemic. The federal government is having districts set aside money in one of the allotments for recoupment, so we need to tackle this with knowledge and research on how this needs to look on every campus, academically and emotionally.

- The next main agenda item for FISD is leadership and moral which ties in to all my other answers- hiring the best leader for this district with the knowledge of all the different departments and campuses. The superintendent's job is to guide the board with honesty, knowledge and understanding. We need an open-door policy so that staff and parents can be heard, morale can improve, and we feel comfortable with communication within and outside the district.

- The COVID plan from the beginning was problematic and that needs to be redone with the understanding that it could change depending on TEA but with input from stakeholders such as administrators, staff and parents is essential. TEA will move to mask choice next year unless there is a new strain that is causing death in children.

### - Kelly DiCuffa:

- The most important issue is FISD leadership. The board will hire a new FISD Superintendent over the next 60-90 days. With this change, there are opportunities to grow leadership, collaboration and communication to students, parents and teachers. This is an exciting opportunity because new leadership will guide the future culture of FISD and will help elevate academics, extracurricular programs, parent involvement, teacher leadership, technology and infrastructure. This will help to take all our campuses and students to the next level. Leadership sets the path. With new leadership, we should see an emphasis on academics, technology, extra curriculars and consistency across the campuses. This emphasis on academics would include focus on reading for our k-3<sup>rd</sup>, support for our students who are "catching up from COVID" and ensuring all of our high school students are future career ready.

- Secondly, infrastructure needs to be reviewed and addressed on all campuses. FISD needs a master facilities plan that accounts for growth. For example, several of our current buildings are not ADA compliant and do not allow for growth. Over the next year, we will review a non-tax raising bond for a new middle school and other infrastructure improvements. Additionally, technology made significant gains during COVID, but there is still work to do as it relates to teacher training, platform consistency and software. We also need to find the balance between technology and classroom training.

- The third most important issue facing FISD is improving communication, both internal and external. This is supported through our parent and teacher survey. Teachers need less paperwork, consistent messaging, and updated communication platforms. Parents need one website that will serve as the one place to go **for all things FISD**.

### - Judge Edwards:

- Our financing needs to change. That starts in Austin.

- Most would agree that we need a new middle school campus, or at minimum a major overhaul to the campus.

- I have to say Property tax is an issue also. Our taxpayers that fund most of our operations are being bobbed by overly high property taxes. As a school district we haven't changed the tax rate, but property values have soared and we are sending away around 30% of our tax funds that we have collected due to a broken state system for funding all schools in Texas. Again, the conversation really needs to be had in Austin.

### - Judge Edwards (Question 8 continued):

*Below I am also taking the opportunity to respond to a series of example issues, because they were included in the original question to the candidates:*

- **Do you believe teachers unions have gotten too strong and have overly influenced the education systems in the US?** No. As a board member I have not been pressured by any unions or other teacher's groups.
- **Do you believe curriculum should be established by teachers for the school year ahead of returning to school in the fall?** This one is hard to answer because I am not a teacher. Whatever they are doing is working, so I would imagine they know best when to establish their curriculum. There is always room for growth, but in general, our teachers are professionals and do a good job.
- **What input would you have for those preparing and building the new middle school?** Focus every inch of the place on excellent student outcome. That would include getting the teachers and admin the best possible campus to work in, and not beating up our taxpayers so that they stick around. This sounds simple, but it is very complex. The system is somewhat of a melting pot of several stake holders and as I say in business, if it isn't good for everybody it isn't going to be good for anybody at the end of the day.
- **Would you recommend reducing the paperwork/reporting burden for teachers that takes away from instruction and relationship with their students?** Absolutely. I am adamantly for teachers having more time to do their job rather than telling the state how they did their job. Teachers are professionals and should be treated as such.
- **Do students need to "catch-up" due to the past year's COVID restrictions - academically, emotionally or relationally? What would you want done to help those most impacted?** We need students at school. At home learning does not work. As for the most impacted, the most important thing for them is to be at school in front of teachers. FISD can help from there, but number is being in class at school learning.
- **Would you vote to put masks back on children if another similar strain of COVID broke loose?** No. That should be left up to our staff and families. We are happy to have anybody that wants to wear a mask do so, but it shouldn't be mandated.