

MEQUON-THIENSVILLE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION

Candidates tackle range of issues during forum

Four running for two open seats

By Lisa Curtis
lcurtis@conleynet.com
262-305-8934

MEQUON — Teacher retention, academic recovery, mask mandates and equity were among the topics addressed during a recent candidate forum for the four people running for the Mequon-Thiensville School Board.

Paul Buzzell, Jill Chromy, Scarlett Johnson and Jason Levash are seeking one of two seats on the April 5 ballot. All participated in an online forum Feb. 28 hosted by the League of Women Voters of Ozaukee County.

In their 90-second opening statements, the candidates talked about why they are running, what they can contribute to the board and, in some cases, where the district is falling behind. All of the candidates have children who are attending the district now or have graduated from MTSD.

Chromy said she wanted to be a member of an MTSD board that is the strongest and best in the state again. She said they need to get back to basics, with more classical education and curriculum with proven outcomes. She called for re-examining teacher ratios in the classrooms.

She talked about the conflict in the community and said she wants to be the person who moves the community forward.

Johnson said her top priority would



Buzzell



Chromy



Johnson



Levash

be reversing multi-year decreases in academic performance and enrollment. She said they have a short window of time to best prepare students for success. She called herself a “mom on the front line” and said she would bring diversity and a fresh perspective to the board. Johnson said they need change, and that while she won’t be a “rubber stamp,” neither will she be a bull in a china shop.

Levash is a former teacher and administrator who is currently the chief operating officer of CESA, an education service agency that provides solutions to K-12 school districts. He said he isn’t motivated by a single issue, but is truly looking to serve. Levash said his background in education and business makes him uniquely qualified.

Levash said being united as a community will be critically important, and he wants the board to engage the community to help every child succeed. He said he will lead with a strong moral and ethical compass and always put children first.

Buzzell, who served on the board from 2014 to 2017, lauded the district and School Board for their success during the COVID-19 pandemic and keeping kids in the classroom. He said the district’s academic recovery is well on its way and that masks are no longer required. A Homestead graduate, Buzzell said the district is ranked

How to watch

To view the forum in its entirety, go to <https://bit.ly/3u0oUDV> or to the League of Women Voters of Ozaukee County website, <https://www.lwv.org/local-leagues/lwv-ozaukee-county> or its Facebook page.

in the top 10 every year. They are not perfect, but they are proactive, he said. He pointed to the district’s strategic plan with five goals and 17 objectives, building growth plans, long-range facilities plan and more. He said they need experienced leadership with a track record of success and a trustworthy bridge between the district and the community.

The forum was moderated by LWV member Mary Fran Lepeska, who asked the candidates 10 questions, giving them one minute each to answer.

Among the questions that were posed were:

■ **How do you propose that Mequon-Thiensville School District both attract and retain talent in the staff?**

Buzzell said MTSD is lucky to be a destination district that doesn’t have a problem attracting the best and brightest, though he cautioned that those numbers are falling. The district’s strategic plan deals directly with employee engagement, which deals with competitive compensation, having the right technological resources in the classrooms and good relationships with building principals.

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"That all being said, people also are just people and they want to work in a place that has some decent civility, and I think one of the things that we need to do as a community to continue to attract talent is to stop attacking our teachers," Buzzell said.

Chromy cited the teacher shortage throughout the country, with MTSD seeing its own turnover. She said staff should be considered the district's most valuable asset and should be supported with strong, competitive salaries.

"We need to ensure that when we staff, the staffing ratio is the right level to provide the right level of student education, that puts our students and our teachers up for success," Chromy said, adding that there needs to be more communication with the teachers.

Johnson said that a partnership between parents and teachers is absolutely vital for them to recover from the pandemic and exceed expectations. She said that not all teachers are part of the Coalition that has shown support for the administration and School Board. Johnson said that she has talked to teachers who say they want to leave the district, not because of parents, but because of how they are treated by the administration. She said they want more time on core subjects and less time on "fads and trends." Merit pay and bonus pay would incentivize teachers to stay, she said.

Levash said that attracting and retaining staff is critical, and the formula for doing that is to ensure teacher engagement and competitive compensation. He said his organization won a workplace excellence award, and he said the driver behind it is ensuring that everyone knows what is expected of them, providing the resources they need, making sure their opinions matter.

For more information

To learn more about each candidate, visit their websites:

Paul Buzzell: <https://www.pb4mtsd.com/>

Jill Chromy: <https://www.chromy4mtsd.com/>

Scarlett Johnson: <https://scarlettforkids.com/>

Jason Levash: <https://www.levash4mtsd.com/>

He said having the best and brightest staff in front of them gives students the most opportunities.

■ In what ways can a school district practice equity and inclusion?

Johnson said that people confuse equal opportunity with equal outcomes, the latter of which she said is not popular and doesn't work. She said equity should be equality of opportunity and making sure each child has what they need to thrive.

Levash said educational equity is the bedrock of why they exist. He said his campaign is about all students, whether they are the gifted students, special needs students or those who are struggling with social-emotional learning needs.

"We need to ensure that our system provides every single student what they need in the moment to be successful," Levash said, adding that they need to position students so that they can achieve their particular goals.

Buzzell said the idea of equity started about six years ago with former Superintendent Demond Means. He said it's not new, but is capturing "big headlines" now. He said it's not about equal outcomes. Buzzell said that while he was a student at Donges Bay elementary, students were split into groups based on their needs. Today, the district has homogeneous classrooms, where everyone gets the same lecture and specialists come in as they are needed.

Chromy said equity and equality means a lot of different things to different people. She said that even the National Association of School Boards said on its website that it "embarked on a journey" to define what educational equity

looks like. She said they as a district need to define what equity looks like at MTSD and then move forward with programming and determine a system of measurable outcomes.

■ What is your stance on mask mandates if future outbreaks occur?

Levash said the district has had a very clear plan based on local health department and CDC guidance, something that can not be said of other districts. He supports the layered levels of mitigation, which were based on the burden level or number of cases in the community.

"We should celebrate where we are," he said about the reduced number of cases.

Buzzell pointed out that masking is over in the district, due to lower burden levels. He said he thought 350 figure that sparks a high burden was too low of a number, but said he stands behind the district.

Chromy said she felt the time was right to do away with the mitigation strategy altogether. She said increasing data questions masking's effectiveness.

"I think there's been a lack of focus on social, on mental health issues and the academic impact from quarantines and masking, along with some medical privacy concerns," Chromy said.

Now is the time to focus on academics and academic recovery, she said.

Johnson agreed, and said the mask mandates need to go.

"We are at the endemic stage," Johnson said. "Now it's not a new normal. It's back to normalcy."

■ Describe how you would make a decision where there are multiple groups of constituents weighing in.

Buzzell said one has to consider many factors when making a decision, including getting input from the administration, asking questions, doing one's own research, talking to the relevant experts and gathering community input.

"Then it's your job to pick the best outcome," he said. "Usually at board meetings, you should be required to explain your thought process and why you got to that answer."

Chromy said it's the job of a school board member to really hear the voices of the stakeholders and respond to questions and concerns. It may not mean that they agree on the same thing, so their role as a board member is to put aside their own thoughts and look at the information presented and make a decision that best supports the students and the teachers.

She added that when they make a decision that not everyone is happy with they should look for additional ways to help those who are not in the majority.

"I just think that's an integral part of being a board member," Chromy said.

Levash said they need to understand the thoughts of everyone, but also validate those who may be in the minority.

"We have to have conversations with stakeholders, tell us what they're thinking and have those diverse conversations," evash said, adding that they ultimately need to make the decision that is in the best interests of students.

Johnson, who was inadvertently skipped during this question, took up the issue on the next question about engaging the public. She said there are parents and stakeholders who felt they haven't been heard.

"We want to unite and rethink the way things have been done," she said, adding that she'd like to focus on community conversations. "It's a way for people who may feel they are in the minority in an opinion, they could feel heard."