

## **Getting to Know Your Blue Ridge CUSD #18 Board Candidates**

Our board candidates were given seven questions to answer in preparation for the upcoming April 4 election. Their responses can be found below in a rotating order. You are also cordially invited to attend a Candidate Forum on Monday, March 20 from 7:00-8:30 p.m. at the Farmer City American Legion. Questions can be emailed in advance to [cusd18forum@gmail.com](mailto:cusd18forum@gmail.com).

### **Tell us a little bit about yourself and why you are running for the Blue Ridge Board of Education.**

#### **1. Rick Noble**

We have lived in Farmer City since 1986. Raised 2 kids in the BRSD and now have 2 grand kids in it. I am a retired from Law Enforcement in 12/21. My retirement hub is working in the outdoors industry for a company making high end performance dog kennels. My passion is family and the outdoors. I enjoy passing the love down to my grand kids.

I am running for school board because I see areas our district needs to improve on things. I served as board president several years ago and did not have the time to focus on the position. Now bro g retired I have more time to focus on tasks at hand.

#### **2. William Grider**

I am running for the kids, I currently have one child in each school and would like to help make their time there have as much value as possible.

#### **3. Melinda Guest**

My name is Melinda Guest, I am a proud wife and mother of 4, a small business owner and a Licensed Realtor with Cornerstone Real Estate. My family moved to Farmer City almost 3 years ago and we immediately fell in love with the community. I'm running for the school board because I want to serve the community that I love, contributing my unique talents while collaborating as a team with other board members, the superintendent, and the community it serves. I believe in quality public education for my children and yours, and I believe we can all join together - parents, teachers, district staff, school board members, the superintendent, and local legislature - to preserve and improve the quality of our school system. It takes a village.

#### **4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung**

I was born and raised in Farmer City, currently residing in the country of Mansfield and working for the University of Illinois. As a lifelong resident and product of the Blue Ridge School District, and having three daughters attending our school system, I hope to ensure our district is successful in growth (both size and educational offerings) as well as financially stable for our tax payers.

#### **5. David Harris**

I have lived in the community most of my life and was educated in the Farmer City School system. They did a pretty good job with me. College educated, I have lived in four states and have been involved in education in each. Largely retired, I was a bus driver for the district for ten

years, mostly transporting special needs students. I have been a substitute teacher for more than fifty years. I pretty well know my way around the school system and how it operates, and want to help us do the best possible job for our students. I want to use my inside-the-box experience to make out-of-the-box improvements.

6. David "Sig" Enger

I was raised in Farmer City and attended Blue Ridge Schools. I furthered my education at Parkland and the University of Illinois. I currently live in Farmer City with my wife and two kids. My brother and I have a business here. I want the best for the kids being raised in our communities.

7. Jonathan Yeagle

I am a lifelong resident of Farmer City, a Blue Ridge Graduate, my wife teaches in the district and my children go to school here. I wish to provide a voice for the community on the Board of Education and work to improve the district as a whole.

8. Derrick Fernandez

Happily married resident of Farmer City for 13 years. God has blessed me with three wonderful kids. I am running for school board to be able to serve the school district. Many people invest in our children and I would like to be a part of investing in them.

**What is your vision for Blue Ridge?**

2. William Grider

I would like to see the school grow and actually have enough teachers to support the kids and not have to worry about which bus will be late because not enough drivers. To me this is unacceptable. Need to start with staff before talking of a "vision."

3. Melinda Guest

My vision for Blue Ridge is a school district that provides a welcoming, safe, and supportive learning environment in which everyone is equal and all achievements are celebrated. A school district where adventurous, determined, and curious children can develop those traits into well rounded, confident, and responsible individuals who aspire to achieve their full potential. A community that comes together with the school to build the best foundation for our children by creating relevant learning opportunities for students, both inside and outside the classroom, to help them develop the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and character to create success in their life now and in the future. My vision for Blue Ridge is to give our children the childhood they need for the future they deserve.

4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung

My vision for the school district is one that continues to hear and adapt to the wants and needs of the parents and children within the district while providing the best educational environment we possibly can.

5. David Harris

First and foremost, improving educational outcomes. I have a host of other concerns I would be happy to discuss with anyone who is interested.

6. David "Sig" Enger

I'd like our community to be seen as a beacon instead of a hazard in the water. The district has had a tarnished reputation and we need to amend that.

7. Jonathan Yeagle

I wish to see the district improve its overall scores in all core curriculum courses and to become competitive enough with surrounding communities so as to attract new students and families, thus increasing overall enrollment. I would also like to see district scores rise and teachers to be incentivized to better our districts scores and the quality of instruction our students receive.

8. Derrick Fernandez

An education system governed by facts and values that prepare the future generations to be critical thinkers and problem solvers. Leaders in thought and actions

1. Rick Noble

I want fairness across the board. This includes teachers, students, other staff and our district residents. I want to see the district move forward with advancements in education but yet balance the costs as ideas move forward.

**How have you seen the district's new mission statement in action?**

3. Melinda Guest

New things always take time and hard work to come to fruition. I am seeing strides and ideas moving in the right direction in line with the new mission statement. One example of the new mission statement being put to action in the classroom is with my daughter's second grade teacher who provides medals to a different child every Friday to reward them for kindness and supporting each other. She does an amazing job of fostering confidence in every child and showing them appreciation and support. In other areas, I believe it'll take more time to really see it flowing freely through more avenues within the school district, and allowing time can be the hard part. In the same sentiment, I believe that there are some bigger steps we can take to ensure that this mission statement is effective in our kids' school lives.

4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung

Yes I have, Embrace, Engage, Equip and Empower. As a current board member we have regular updates on how we are incorporating the new mission statement along with our new strategic plan and we as a board ensure we take these items seriously for the success of our district.

5. David Harris

Mission statements have little or no tangible effect.

6. David "Sig" Enger

I've attended recent board meetings and witnessed the formulation of a cohesive student management process that will empower our administrators and staff to provide a stable learning environment and consistent expectations for behavior.

7. Jonathan Yeagle

I have seen good improvements in certain buildings such as Schnieder elementary. However, the district has not elevated confidence in its leadership.

8. Derrick Fernandez

I have seen how the three schools that make up Blue Ridge Ridge are working toward making rules and regulations common for the students of different ages.

1. Rick Noble

No

2. William Grider

No, while its a start, I think equipping our kids with the knowledge they need would come first.

**Do you have any specific areas of concern for the district?**

4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung

My only area would be sustaining growth. I see this as a combination issue between our communities and our District. The only thing we as a district can control within this is providing the best school system we can while hoping our associated communities do their part to foster growth as well.

5. David Harris

Increasing pay for our support staff. The pay for these folks is in many instances an insult, given their hard work and contributions to our community. Addressing chronic truancy. And a physical one--providing students a sheltered area to wait for buses in inclement weather. Our lack of such is a disgrace. We do a good job with special needs students, but we have to remember to support and encourage our high achieving students too. I have a list of about twenty-five other items I would be happy to share with any who are interested.

6. David "Sig" Enger

Top-down government agendas being pushed onto our school district that may not represent our interests. Family participation/cooperation in the student's education and support of extracurricular activities.

7. Jonathan Yeagle

I am concerned about transparency and honest communication about issues in the district from district leadership. I am also concerned about falling scores in state educational standards in our district while other surrounding districts do not show the same data.

8. Derrick Fernandez

No specific issues come to mind.

1. Rick Noble

I think the state and government are forcing districts to comply with issues facing our society. Boards have got to start standing up for them selves and doing what is right. I also want to see a better relationship with the district and citizens of the district. In years past I think trust has been broken and I want to get that back. We are all I. This together. One team.

2. William Grider

Lack of teachers and lack of actual accountability. The board has several members that have significant others or spouses that work for the school, and that to me is a conflict of interest.

3. Melinda Guest

One area of concern I have is one that is not specific to our school district, but rather a nationwide issue that all school districts have had to face. Both of my girls have experienced bullying at school to the point of coming home in tears, and at times it has greatly affected their willingness to even go to school. From being chased and shoved down on the playground to name calling, and even body shaming, these are things that my children have actually experienced, and such things can affect their mental health now and forever. I know the school has anti-bullying programs and curriculum that they teach, yet something more seems to be needed to curb these continued issues. I've seen the curriculum that my children are learning such as "Be a Buddy, Not a Bully" and other ways in which they teach kindness and empathy. I see teachers creating opportunities to create new connections so that children can understand differences instead of fearing them. However I do believe that more can be done to prevent these bully-like behaviors, such as identifying "Gateway Behaviors" when they first start. This can include laughing at other students, whispering and pointing, and excluding or ignoring other children, just to name a few. My children have also been terrified of retribution if they "tattle" to an adult, so encouraging them to speak up so that these behaviors can be stopped is crucial to curbing this behavior. These issues have been present since we were all children, bullying is nothing new, but the solutions can be new! And this is an issue that's our responsibility to improve for the next generation. I believe our children deserve a childhood experience that they don't have to recover from.

**Describe the ideal relationship between the board, administration, and district employees.**

5. David Harris

Putting aside adversarial issues and working together for the good of our students, community, and taxpayers.

6. David "Sig" Enger

The ideal relationship is that the board is able to support and listen to district employees and provide the tools to educators to encourage a positive learning environment for the children. A board needs to be active and cognizant of what the curriculum is and invested in the interest of our children.

7. Jonathan Yeagle

The board should be the elected representative of the citizens to ensure that the quality of education provided by district personnel is of the highest standard and to ensure that tax revenue is being spent in a manner consistent with that goal. Open and honest communication should exist between the board, administration, and employees. Employees should feel as though they can approach the administration with confidence and know that their concerns will be addressed and their opinions will be listened to openly..

8. Derrick Fernandez

Without having served on a school board before I don't have an idea of what the ideal relationship should be. Professional relationships in general should have an open honest communication using a common language. Employees deserve to have an administration that not only sets achievable goals, but provides the tools necessary to achieve them. As a board member I hope to help that happen.

1. Rick Noble

Work together for the number one goal of educating our future.

2. William Grider

They should be holding one another accountable, in previous answer for areas of concern, I noted that there is an overlap with spouses or family members which I think should be addressed.

3. Melinda Guest

I believe the ideal relationship between the board, school administration, and district employees begins with mutual respect. It is imperative that all individuals involved can find common ground and execute an agenda that prioritizes students' needs and achievements. Often confronting complex and unexpected problems requires all members to approach the issues with flexible thinking, collaboration, and shared decision making. By prioritizing our students' needs and being accountability-driven, all members can and should work together to create an ideal relationship that provides the highest level of service on what is most vital to student success.

4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung

The ideal relationship is one based on respect, understanding and professionalism. The hierarchy chart for our organization spells out how the relationship works but we all must understand that there are diverse opinions in any action, how we handle these opposite views determines how well the relationship plays out in public view.

**As a new board member, what tangible suggestions would you offer in regards to the teacher shortage?**

6. David "Sig" Enger

Offer flexible solutions to hire quality individuals. Candidates may need to obtain a teaching certificate while employed and perhaps the district could assist with certification while requiring a mandatory retainer.

7. Jonathan Yeagle

Our teachers should be compensated appropriately and competitively. Our teachers should be held to a higher standard so as to attract quality new teachers to the district. The administration and board should assist in this by promoting the quality of the district and though encouraging staff to take on student teachers.

8. Derrick Fernandez

Many communities are facing the same problem. Start by knowing the actual reason why we have a teacher shortage. We should reach out to college students and find out what would it take for them to come to a small town to teach. Find out what personal barriers exist. Partner with local businesses to overcome those barriers (loans, housing, services).

1. Rick Noble

Teachers need treated with respect. They need to have a voice. If we start treating teachers with respect less will retire on the first day they can. Also the BofE needs to support our teachers. This is not a us and them. This is a team.

2. William Grider

Better the students we have to make the District more appealing to teachers, right now if teachers are just trying to full fill their degrees we will be in the same boat year after year.

3. Melinda Guest

The current teacher shortage will require a complex solution to not only retain good teachers, but also to attract people to begin new careers in teaching. The first step to this solution is better salary compensation. The National Education Association reports that 40% of teachers in the nation are living BELOW the poverty line. Research has consistently shown that states and districts with higher teacher salaries are also reporting higher levels of student achievement. While projected income changes are highly reliant on budget constraints and would require a

comprehensive plan to realistically implement, the solution doesn't stop there. We can start by providing stronger support systems for teachers and giving them a seat at the table. Research shows that school leaders who protect teachers' time, invite their input, and support their mental health and well-being of their educators also see higher levels of satisfaction in their current employees while being more desirable to possible candidates searching for teacher positions. This means that the easiest way to improve working conditions for teachers and respect the expertise that they bring to the table is for schools and districts to give teachers more input into basic decisions, such as age appropriate curriculum and other ways to structure their classroom. These professionals know better than anyone how to tailor lesson plans and what subjects to address to ensure success in the classroom. Teachers could also be involved in school-wide policies and the content of professional learning opportunities.

I believe another important factor is appropriately managing teachers/staff who are consistently receiving complaints. The teacher shortage can definitely complicate the need to terminate an existing staff member who is having disciplinary issues. That being said, by following through with consistent enforcement of policies and procedures, we can avoid dedicated teachers feeling unappreciated and experiencing faster burn out, while others who might have had consistent complaints and issues continue the same behavior with limited accountability. By taking new steps to improve the working environment for all teachers we can thereby improve the education for our children in the process.

#### 4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung

Technically I'm not a new board member but I see the teacher shortage as a world issue, just not within our district as all others are having the same issue. Children behavior, lack of resources, compared lower pay etc. contribute to the lack of people entering the field. I think until we as a society make some changes within ourselves, we may continue to see a decline.

#### 5. David Harris

Increased pay for starting teachers. I would not favor lowering standards.

### **What else would you like for voters to know before the election?**

#### 7. Jonathan Yeagle

I want to represent the citizens of this district to ensure that our students are receiving an education of the highest quality. I want to ensure that the district is being fiscally responsible with the communities tax dollars, and that I will work to improve the district and the community.

#### 8. Derrick Fernandez

Growing up I didn't understand the value of education. School was about getting a grade. With my children I have made it a point to talk about education as building your toolbox for life.

#### 1. Rick Noble

I spent 4 years on the board back when they were going to cut all extra curricular activities and RIF over 50% of the districts. I fought tooth and nail, leading the charge to find options to keep



our extra curricular activities in place. When it came to the meeting to RIF the teachers it was me against the board. In the end there was no second on the RIF vote. I am here for the kids, teachers and administration and the district citizens. I bring common sense to the table. I would like the opportunity to serve the students, staff and district citizens again. It is time we do what is right!

2. William Grider

I have heard from people both in the community and (workers for the school/parents) that are concerned with the school system as a whole regarding fights, teaching staff and various other situations where the board or the community needed to step up and help, so here I am. My only motivation for this is the children, I want a better start for them to help them succeed not just in high school but in life.

3. Melinda Guest

As a child I was homeschooled and didn't have the ability to be involved in school functions and live the full school experience. Now that my children are in public school and are becoming more involved in school functions, I want to get involved as well. I want to be the biggest cheerleader for my kids AND your kids. My family has had some amazingly positive experiences at Blue Ridge, but we've also had some negative experiences. I see all of the good that the school district has to offer and the positivity that these amazing educators pour into our children every day, but I also believe there is more that can be done to create meaningful change to maximize the amount of success that our children experience in this stage of their lives. I want to be a part of that change, I want to be a part of the explosion of school spirit that our community is about to experience. Thank you for your time and consideration, and for your dedication to exercising your right to vote as your voice to speak for the needs of our children.

4. Russell (Rusty) Woliung

I believe our district is making leaps towards the envisioned district the parents have been asking for. While there is still work to do, I hope the new board members can put any personal agendas aside and work together to keep the momentum going as it doesn't take much to cause a slide in the wrong direction.

5. David Harris

I am not a single issue candidate. Do not expect me to automatically rubber stamp items brought to the board by the administration. I will first study them carefully. You can expect me to be an activist member who will be responsive to the community, but who will make intelligent, thoughtful, and informed decisions.

6. David "Sig" Enger

(No response)