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## Hillsborough school candidates respond to district issues

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Keeping the Hillsborough City Elementary School District one of the top districts in the state, while adjusting to Common Core standards and technology are important issues for those seeking a seat on the district's Board of Trustees.

There are three open seats on the board. Trustees Steven Koury and Mary Ellen Benninger are not seeking re-election, making current president Lynne Esselstein the only incumbent in the race. The other candidates are Don Geddis, Kaarin Hardy and Pearl Wu.

An in-office forum was held to help the Daily Journal determine endorsements. To allow each candidate a forum to express their opinions on the issues discussed, candidates were given the same questions and asked to answer each in 50 words or fewer. Answers are arranged alphabetically by the candidate's last name.

Do you think the district has sufficiently prepared for the Common Core standards?

Lynne Esselstein: We began implementation over a year ago. In 2012, teachers began standards and instructional professional development trainings, two elementary schools participated in Smarter Balance Assessment trials and Crocker changed to a new schedule allowing for embedded common planning time for each academic department. We have a plan; we're on track.

Don Geddis: Common Core standards are still a year away, and the district's preparation is on schedule. Last spring, Hillsborough schools had trials of the Common Core assessments. This past summer, extensive professional development focused on the new standards. Finally, the improved Crocker schedule allows significantly more time for teacher collaboration.

Kaarin Hardy: Yes. Our preparations have included grade level work to understand the standards, and evaluate the changes needed across our curriculum, as well as ongoing staff development. Additionally, to ensure adequate collaborative time for teachers, and increased teaching time for students, a new student schedule was implemented at Crocker Middle School.

Pearl Wu: The Hillsborough schools are high performing and have been preparing for the Common Core for the past five years. Concurrent to "no child left behind" is my reinforcing mission that "every child goes forward!" Electives on science, technology and engineering complement reading, writing and math as enrichment venues for students.

What do you think of the district's use of capital appreciation bonds?

Lynne Esselstein: The district's CABs represent a small percentage of our overall \$66.8 million bond program (total debt ratio is 3.29:1), were structured with CIBs to manage interest and avoid balloon payments, and are callable (a recent refinance saved our taxpayers \$2 million). HCSD CAB use was informed, conservative and



**Lynne  
Esselstein**



**Don Geddis**



**Kaarin Hardy**



**Pearl Wu**

appropriate for our situation.

Don Geddis: The district has wisely used well-designed CABs, as part of its fiscally conservative financial plan. The concerns raised by the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury generally don't apply to the structure of Hillsborough bonds. Our Citizen's Oversight Committee thoroughly monitored the finances, and gave a stellar review.

Kaarin Hardy: Our district has acted responsibly and taken precautions to help safeguard our taxpayers. HCSD's CABs meet the recommendations proposed by the Grand Jury including a callable option, our debt ratio is well below the recommended 4:1, and the district maintains a AAA Bond rating. All signs of sound financial management.

Pearl Wu: At the Aug. 21, 2013 school board meeting, capital appreciation bonds were discussed. My stand is to firmly safeguard taxpayers' hard earned money. There is a statewide moratorium on CABs, and prudent judgment to avert short-term gain for long-term pain is key to the district's financial health.

Do you think the current educational offerings provide the right emphasis?

Lynne Esselstein: Yes, but the program looks different than it did in 2008. Budget cuts eliminated K-5 Spanish and some computer lab support, but protected music, innovation lab, counseling and libraries. Now standards are changing, funding is improving and we have begun a community-wide conversation to talk about educational priorities — transformation is coming.

Don Geddis: The district's curriculum is excellent, in both mandated material as well as enrichment such as Essential Outcomes and Innovation Labs. The district also recently has begun a comprehensive strategic visioning process. I'm particularly excited about more extensive differentiation, as well as teaching the skill of persistence.

Kaarin Hardy: We have a rich curriculum that incorporates problem solving, social and emotional learning with the basics of math, reading and science. The district is undertaking a comprehensive strategic planning initiative to ensure what we teach keeps pace with a changing world. I'm excited to contribute to this planning process.

Pearl Wu: Aligning Common Core [standards] with an uncharacteristic drop in HCSD STAR performance in a math section below the state benchmark, the current curriculum emphasizes math with class time at 65 minutes each day. This enhances problem-solving strategies by students and collaboration among teachers for students' mastery of concepts and applications.

What changes would you like to see at the board level?

Lynne Esselstein: We have an excellent board right now and have prepared a solid foundation for integrating new members in November. Recently, we took time to review, update and publically adopt our governance norms, reaffirming the values of transparency, communication, integrity, respect and teamwork that we rely on to work well together.

Don Geddis: Much board activity, by necessity, focuses on budgets, regulations and personnel. I would like additional board effort on an overall educational vision. Fortunately the district has recently begun a strategic planning process, to which I'm eager to contribute my strengths.

Kaarin Hardy: Over the last four years, the board focused on a balanced budget in a difficult economy. The board spent considerable time with budget cuts and personnel issues. The upcoming strategic planning initiative will allow the board to more deeply consider our future and our community's commitment to excellence in education.

Pearl Wu: As an avid parent volunteer for my three children's classes, and as a seasoned physician leader and community health advocate, I add insight, leadership skills on innovation, high IQ /EQ and multicultural elements to the school board. My focus is on transparency and accountability for superior performance on the board.

Do you feel there is an appropriate amount of high-tech learning?

Lynne Esselstein: Technology is a tool; it cannot replace good teaching. It can enhance content learning and critical thinking, but it's not an end in itself. We know more technology is coming to the classroom. Defining the "appropriate amount" is something I look forward to exploring with the community during HCSD Forward.

Don Geddis: Hillsborough already incorporates a significant amount of technology into the existing curriculum. Improvement is always possible, but the current offerings are strong. There are smart boards in every classroom, and extensive technology in the Innovation Labs. I would have computers help more in areas such as rote memorization.

Kaarin Hardy: Yes — but we can always do more. Our curriculum incorporates robotics and innovation labs at the elementary level and our middle school students produce a daily news show in our state-of-the-art studio. As we adopt the [Common] Core curriculum, we will need to invest further in how our children use technology.

Pearl Wu: Plenty of high-tech learning occurs at the Hillsborough schools that stimulate the students' love of learning. From the smart boards to computer labs for kindergartners to play with geometric shapes, to the Crocker eighth graders' substantial Web/YouTube researches on their Share projects, high-tech learning comes alive in a thriving community.

Bios:

Lynne Esselstein

Age: 49

Education: A.B. Humanities, UC Berkeley and J.D., UC Davis King Hall School of Law

Experience: School board president, consultant on nonprofit governance, attorney admitted to California and New York bars, court appointed special advocate

Family: Married, two daughters

Residence: 17 years in Hillsborough

Don Geddis

Age: 46

Education: B.S. 1987, M.S. 1992, Ph.D. 1995, all in computer science all from Stanford University

Experience: Entrepreneur, current member of Hillsborough schools GATE committee, created parent group web sites for all four Hillsborough schools

Family: Married, two daughters

Residence: 13 years in Hillsborough

Kaarin Hardy

Age: 44

Education: B.A. in political science, DePauw University, master's degree in government administration from University of Pennsylvania Fels Center of Government

Experience: Management consultant focusing on improving the efficiency and efficacy of public sector organizations, vice president of volunteers for Crocker Parent Board

Family: Married, three children

Residence: Hillsborough since 2005

Pearl G. Wu

Age: 50

Education: Mount Holyoke College, B.A., biochemistry/premed, Tufts University School of Medicine, doctor of medicine, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center/UCLA, internship and residency

Experience: Parent/physician leader, parent volunteer for preschool through Crocker Middle School

Family: Married, three children

Residence: Hillsborough for 11 years