

Please answer the following questions for the Casper Star-Tribune voter guide for the Natrona County School District Board of Trustees. Try to keep answers to each question under 150 words. Email your responses back to me (allison.allson@trib.com) by 5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 18.

First, please provide some background information about yourself for the voters:

As a registered nurse with more than a decade of experience and as a dedicated community advocate, my professional journey has equipped me with a unique blend of skills in healthcare and education. Over the years, I've actively served on several boards, including the Memorial Hospital Board of Natrona County, the Department of Family Services Advisory Council and the City of Casper Council of People with Disabilities, which have all provided valuable experience in leadership, governance, and policy-making. Additionally, I've spent the last four years attending school board meetings and committee meetings, where I've gained in-depth knowledge of the challenges and opportunities within our local education system.

Candidate Questions:

1. The most recent assessment data has been released. Natrona County saw drops in proficiency in all three subjects in various grade levels. If you were to gain a seat on the board, what changes would you push to try to raise scores?

The recent decline in proficiency scores highlights the need for a renewed focus on foundational academic skills, particularly in reading, writing, and math. I would advocate for a return to a content-rich curriculum that emphasizes these areas while supporting teachers with the resources they need. Teachers should have the autonomy to craft lesson plans that meet the unique needs of their students, using district-approved resources. We also need to ensure that parents are actively involved in their children's education, with clear communication about student progress and additional support at home through family reading programs and phonics tools.

2. The board has recently faced criticism in the way it has handled or failed to handle the mental health crisis among students. In your opinion, what should the board be doing to address this concern?

The mental health of our students is critically important, but the role of schools should focus on education first. I believe in supporting families by partnering with mental health professionals and community resources rather than overburdening teachers with additional responsibilities beyond the classroom. Schools should be an outlet, not the provider, for mental health services. Additionally, the board and district need to do a better job at evaluating the efficacy of the programs we currently have in place to address mental health and behavioral issues. It's important to ensure that we are adequately addressing these problems within the lane of the school—focusing on academic achievement, providing a safe environment, and supporting students without overextending our role. By doing this, we can ensure that students are receiving the help they need while families and professionals take the lead on comprehensive mental health care.

3. Are there any changes you wish to see in the way the board interacts with the public?

Yes, transparency and open communication are essential. I would advocate for more regular community forums and advisory councils involving parents, teachers, and students to ensure all voices are heard. It's also important that the board provides clear, accessible information on key decisions and policies. We need to foster trust by being proactive, not just reactive, in communication. Additionally, the use of anonymous reporting systems can empower stakeholders to voice concerns without fear of retaliation, ensuring the board addresses issues comprehensively.

4. What are your thoughts on the Kelly Walsh Master Plan?

I believe in investing in our school infrastructure, we need to ensure that all schools in our district, including Midwest and Edgerton, receive equitable attention and resources. The Kelly Walsh Master Plan should balance the needs of that school with those of other schools in the district. Moving forward, I would push for a more transparent process with the community and ensure that our investments align with both the educational and infrastructural needs of the entire district.

5. Recently there have been incidents involving threats to schools. How should the board handle these concerns moving forward? What actions, if any, need to be taken to ensure our schools remain a safe place?

School safety is non-negotiable, and NCSD already has several measures in place to address this issue, including school resource officers, safety drills, and reporting systems. However, it's essential that the board takes a proactive approach, instead of just being reactive, by regularly reviewing and updating these protocols to ensure they are effective and responsive to evolving challenges. This includes continued close collaboration with local law enforcement to guarantee swift responses and clear communication during any incidents.

Equally important is the district's obligation to provide proper and adequate responses to potential threats and safety concerns, adhering to legal standards. Every report must be handled in compliance with the law, ensuring that both student and staff rights are protected while prioritizing safety.

6. What areas of the district do you think need the most improvement?

There are several areas that could use attention, but most critically, we must focus on improving academic performance, particularly in reading, writing, and math. Proficiency levels have been dropping since before 2018, and we need to address this through curriculum adjustments, better support for teachers, and greater parental involvement. Additionally, I would like to see improvements in how we prioritize funding across schools, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, particularly for schools that may not receive as much attention. Ultimately, meaningful change is necessary to reverse these trends and ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed.