



AMY CAST

Northshore School District No. 417
Director District No. 5

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QUESTION #1

**As PTA leaders we believe that our children's education is a team effort. Describe ways in which you have contributed to this effort, and communicated with district staff, the administration, organizations, government officials, and other stakeholders to share ideas and solve problems for our students and community.
Bonus question: which PTAs do you belong to?**

RESPONSE #1

One reason why I am a passionate supporter of public education and decided to run for school board is that I have seen throughout my life how schools weave a community together. Public schools are the fabric that bring together people from all corners of a community in support of our children. And even though I have lived all across the country, I have never seen this work done as beautifully as here in Northshore.

Forming partnerships in support of our schools and our students is something I have dedicated myself to over the past eight years. I have worked with our three city councils in support of joint projects like the Kenmore Boathouse. I have worked with faith communities, attending events like a community tea at the Islamic Center in Bothell. As the board's legislative representative for the past three years, I have partnered with our nine representatives in Olympia to increase funding and reduce red tape for our schools. I have designed and facilitated roundtables with Congresswoman DelBene and her staff. Over the past 16 months, I have been part of a weekly regional work group of school boards from 5 King County school districts to share ideas and lobby health departments as a group as we moved through the different phases of the pandemic. I have designed and participated in several Spanish-speaking community discussions on a wide variety of topics from addressing growth in the district, to needed curriculum supports. I have directly supported wonderful community organizations such as Centro Cultural Mexicano, NAMI-Eastside, the Scholarship Foundation of Northshore, the Northshore Wall of Honor association, and Woodinville and Northshore Rotaries. In a district as large and as multi-layered as Northshore, I am passionate about reaching out to every individual and stakeholder to build our community's capacity to serve our children.

And I firmly believe in this work on a micro scale as well. I meet with any parent (or group of parents) who request it, engaging in sometimes challenging discussions that others might avoid. When asked by a father - who called me for several weeks in a row during the height of the pandemic - why I was willing to continue to respectfully have these conversations, I told him one of my core philosophies. I will always, always, support a parent who is advocating for their child. Even if the conversation becomes pointed or heated or challenging, and might not have an immediate solution, I will always lean into the conversation.

As for my PTA involvement: my journey serving Northshore started when I became an Art Docent in Sunrise Elementary many years ago. I held many officer positions, and was honored to receive the Golden Acorn from the Sunrise PTA in 2013 and Woodinville High PTSA in 2020. I am currently a member of the Woodinville High PTSA and am in charge of creating the student directory.

QUESTION #2

One of Washington State PTA's top legislative issues is: "Supports and Funding for Students with Disabilities and Their Families". Do you think this needs more attention and if so, what would you do to advocate for supports and funding for Special Education?

RESPONSE #2

For decades, our federal and state governments have failed to live up to their obligations around Special Education services. Even as state legislative and federal government officials have agreed that Special Education services fall under the umbrella of Basic Education, they fail to fully fund the services even as they create new unfunded mandates each year. Every year, our district must use funds from our Local Levy, which is supposed to be for programs above and beyond basic education, to support our Special Education budget. Last year, the district used \$16million from the Local Levy in order to fulfill our obligations to our special education students. That's why every year I continue to include this shortfall as a high priority in the board's Legislative Priorities when conducting annual meetings with our legislators.

While this funding shortfall is something that we face annually, we have not been discouraged by it. We continue to press on with improving support for our students in special education students, especially with our initiative to include more students receiving special education services in classrooms with their general education peers (often called "inclusive practices"). Two of our elementary schools are taking part in a program with the Haring Center for Inclusive Education at University of Washington to learn how to grow our inclusive practices. One of our middle schools and two of our high schools are also studying best practices to grow inclusive practices and better support our special education students. And I am introducing a proposal to add a line item to our policies to track Least Restrictive Environment data so that this work has direct visibility at the board level.

QUESTION #3

Northshore School District has a Strategic Plan with Four Building Blocks. "Building Block 1: Equitable Access to Personalized and Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning. Teaching and learning is the central function of our school system. We will advocate for standards, practices and programs that engage every student in challenging work, regardless of their current level of performance. And, because 'one size does not fit all,' we will differentiate and scaffold instruction and supports to meet the unique strengths, backgrounds, readiness, and learning styles of each student." What does Building Block 1 mean to you and how would you approach it as a school board director?

RESPONSE #3

The first way is to have a deep understanding of how an individualized education for each student happens from an instructional perspective. I have supported the growth of special educational inclusive practices, which evolve our services from being siloed in a separate classroom to being woven into the general educational classroom. These practices are proven to greatly boost outcomes for students receiving special educational services. Another example is my support for additional choice programs. Choice programs should not be a gimmick or fad. Rather, they should be an outcome from identifying needs for our students. From the Northshore Family Partnership (to increase support to homeschooled students and families), to Innovation Lab High School (which provides a smaller and project-driven program), to supporting innovative course offerings at each school like Mandarin classes and Project Lead the Way engineering classes and Advanced Placement Capstone courses. All these programs came out of requests from our community, which I supported and guided into existence.

The second way to support students' unique needs is to foster a culture where each student feels seen, heard and valued. Instead of top-down dictates that create cookie-cutter environments at each school, the policies I helped craft are purposefully designed to foster cultures that are a reflection of the local school community. Studies such as the "Characteristics of Positive Outlier Schools" study from the Center of Educational Excellence demonstrate the importance of celebrating the cultures of our students, and how a sense of belonging and dignity directly correlates with strong outcomes for students. In the past several years, our district has seen the creation of new affinity clubs such as Black Student Unions, Latino Clubs, GSA Clubs, and Women in STEM clubs. We have found partnerships (with PTAs and the Northshore Schools Foundation) to diversify our libraries so that our students see themselves and their peers reflected in our materials. We have found unique ways at each school to support different identities and backgrounds. We have also formed Equity teams at each school, so that this work continues at the classroom level. While many people will focus solely on the instructional side of the equation, the cultural aspect is just as important.

QUESTION #4

Two of Washington State PTA's top legislative issues are: "Increase Access to Nursing, Mental Health, and Social Emotional Learning Staff" and "Prevent and Reduce Gun Violence and Suicide". This coincides with the concerns of many Northshore families as well. The district has mental health supports at every school including staff and curriculum. For example, every elementary school of at least 500 students has a full-time mental health counselor and smaller schools have a half-time counselor. What is the district doing well? What should it be doing to better to support students' mental health and safety?

RESPONSE #4

While we have made steady progress in the area of supporting the mental health of our students, there is much work to be done. In the absence of state funding for mental health counselors for our schools, we've had to get creative with a combination of outside grants and have rearranged district budgets to add mental health counselors to our schools.

But I think it's important to realize two things: first of all, the pandemic has impacted every one of our 23,000 students in 23,000 unique ways. Secondly, we will never have the resources to offer full mental health counseling services on par with a medical facility. Given these, I think it's very important to, first of all, help our staff members get training in recognizing and supporting students who have experienced trauma. It can manifest in many different ways for our students, and there are many programs that help educators become aware of what to look for, and how to support students who have experienced trauma. Secondly, I think it's very important for our focus to be on screening for mental health conditions for all our students. Currently, we have received a grant from King County's Best Start for Kids grant to use the SBIRT screener in our middle schools. We need to grow these partnerships to have systematic screeners for each grade. This must also be coupled with doing all we can to find a dependable set of mental health resources to refer students and families to if a condition is indicated.

Supporting the safety of our students is also incredibly important. Thanks to our community's support of our Capital Bond in 2018, our schools have been able to add several new safety measures. Every classroom door in the district has been fitted with a lock. There are camera systems being installed on our campuses. We have also studied the "open" design of our campuses, and are adding fencing where needed. We also continue to suicide prevention programs to our high schools such as the Work2BeWell Program from Providence.

QUESTION #5

Funding is basically fixed and so new spending in one area means making cuts somewhere else.

Some of the things that Northshore has chosen to spend their money on are: the 7-period day for high school, and staffing for nurses & counselors beyond what the state provides. Where do you think we need to spend more of our resources and where would you cut spending to make it work budget-wise?

RESPONSE #5

To be honest, this is a challenging question for me to answer during this time of recovery from the pandemic. It is something that has bounced around my brain for more than one sleepless night. The list of critical needs is long. To support our students' academic recovery, now more than ever we must not take any resources out of the classroom. The money set aside for a new elementary English/Language Arts curriculum is critical. We have pinched pennies for literally years to be able to make shifts to support a move towards Healthy Start Times. Cuts in administrative departments such as IT or Communications or Student Services directly impact our ability to serve students and families.

That is why I have been advocating for several years for Northshore to create a structured program evaluation system. The decisions around where to invest our precious resources should not be up to the gut of a board member. As part of our establishment of a financial system grounded in best practices from the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), we are also adopting structured processes to evaluate whether our programs are resulting in the student outcomes we need. This program evaluation system is critical if we are going to have a data-driven, needs based resource allocation system that makes the best use of our community's tax dollars. The deployment of this system started in the fall of 2019, and was paused in order to help our administration focus all their time on addressing the pandemic. It is getting picked back up in earnest this fall.

Balancing where to allocate our resources is a complex calculation to make (and which, honestly, transitions into the next question regarding Policy Governance). For me, as a board member, to directly dictate exactly where funds should be spent could create several unintended consequences. Instead, I prioritize bringing in as many resources into the district as possible. I directly lobbied for more relief equalization aid from the state, which helped bring in an extra \$3.5million this past April. I am also working directly with King County to help find ways to bring more resources from the county's Best Start for Kids program to support our recovery.

QUESTION #6

What is a school board member's role and responsibility under the law and under Policy Governance? How does that role differ from the role of the superintendent or the administration?

RESPONSE #6

The board's primary role falls in four areas: to set the strategic direction of the district, to carefully oversee the resources and assets of the district, to hire and evaluate the superintendent, and to provide oversight on the programs of the district. Under the law, the board also must approve curriculum, pass a budget resolution, and directly approve a list of specific policies and requirements (for instance, OSPI required a board vote on the 2021 School Reopening plan).

Policy Governance is a structure designed to provide detailed guidance on the board's requirements in these areas, while keeping the board out of the day-to-day running of the district. From student outcomes (in our Goals policy), to how the Superintendent is to manage the district (in our Superintendent Parameters), these policies create very clear direction not only for the Superintendent but throughout our complex and large district. In addition, Policy Governance creates a regular schedule to review performance under these policies. It's a very methodical way to ensure the board is overseeing every corner of the district, and not just the Hot Topic of the Day.

If a board starts to delve into operational areas of the district, this micromanagement has been proven to reduce student outcomes. The Iowa Association of School Boards conducted a series of studies on effective school board behaviors (called the Lighthouse Studies). They found that there is a strong positive correlation with high student achievement and boards that: communicate high expectations for all students, treat individuals with respect, foster a culture of collaboration, commit to a clear and share purpose, regularly monitor the budget and student outcomes, and honor the role and responsibilities of the superintendent.

It's my goal to ensure that my time on the board supports a tightly coordinated mission to create organizational alignment focused on creating complex - and positive - outcomes for our students.

QUESTION #7

Within our school district, there is a lot of residential building. Overcrowding is a major issue in many of our schools as well as portables and buildings that are old and need maintenance. What are the steps you would suggest the district take to alleviate these issues?

RESPONSE #7

While I want to await the final recommendation of the 70+ community volunteers on our Capital Projects Task Force, I have so far been convinced that this bond cycle is a great time to invest in upgrading several of our older school buildings. For too long, schools like Frank Love and Kokanee have had permanent portables. The new extension between Skyview Middle School and Canyon Creek Elementary is a great example of how our district can create permanent buildings that acknowledge these student populations are here to stay. And as demographic data is showing that elementary grades will continue to have growth over the next several years, this can be a joint growth + maintenance endeavor. And it's not just our elementary schools that have shown their age. Leota Middle School and Inglemoor High School are two examples of aging buildings that need attention.

The question will be how many projects to take on. We must be mindful of the tax burden on our homeowners. Districts like Lake Washington and Bellevue have been able to be more aggressive in their remodeling timeline as they have a large commercial tax base to leverage. Our situation in Northshore is very different, and I have always strongly advocated for carefully balancing the facilities needs of the district with what our taxpayers can reasonably be expected to sustain.



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