

Keys to the Candidates
Compiled by the League of Women Voters of Bloomington-Monroe County
for the
2016 General Election

MCCSC Board, District 4

Cathy Fuentes-Rohwer
James Shackelford

1. What are your qualifications for the office you are seeking?

FUENTES-ROHWER: I am a long-time (14 yrs. now) MCCSC parent of four children: two who have graduated from Bloomington South, one who will graduate next year, and my youngest who is still in elementary school. I played a key role in the referendum campaign of 2010 and subsequently helped create and became the chair of the Indiana Coalition for Public Education—Monroe County, advocating at the state and local level for public schools.

SHACKELFORD: I understand U.S. schools well, from many angles. I'm committed to listening to all on the strengths of our school district. In every effort, we should maintain what is strong. In every effort we must be honest about what's not going well, and address mistakes that are socially accepted. I notice major strengths and weaknesses. We must eliminate mistreatment of students via psychiatric labels and drugs. My saying that is an important qualification.

2. How would you work to ensure transparency in school board operations?

FUENTES-ROHWER: Transparency is intertwined with communication and community engagement. We should never have policy changes that come as a surprise to those most closely affected: students, teachers and families. I believe that the board needs to find different ways to hear back from the community about issues that are important to them as well as reaching out to inform them of decisions that will need to be made. The public should have ample time to review the budget before it comes to a vote. When programs or policy changes are made, the purpose should be clear and an evaluation process put in place, so that we can later evaluate whether it was achieved or what needs to be tweaked or thrown out.

SHACKELFORD: I would simply try to be very honest about my thoughts, and expect others to do the same. Decisions and the thinking behind them should always be visible to the public. We have to go farther than transparency. We must always strive for fairness and accuracy. Part of transparency is letting people see one's thinking evolve. On my Facebook page nearly everything is unedited, written as I would say it to someone on the B-Line. Even where my logic is good, my word choices may be less than ideal. I try to improve as I go, not shape an impressive image. Young people are very good role models on this.

3. Should teachers have a role in the development of system-wide policies and priorities and, if so, how can the school board ensure that they do?

FUENTES-ROHWER: I think that it's vitally important that teachers be at the center of any policy change. They are the professionals who know best how policy translates into the lived experiences of students; they are with them every day. State (and federal) policy of high-stakes testing has created an intense atmosphere for educators and children. As a parent, I know that my children's learning conditions are teachers' working conditions. I see my kids' teachers try to buffer my children from the intensity of testing. We must try to do the same for teachers. We must be creative and committed to finding them safe ways to give feedback on what works and what doesn't. We need to offer help and professional development for those who struggle.

SHACKELFORD: Of course they should. The more difficult questions have to do with how, and to what extent. And that varies depending on the policy. A board member can make it clear that teacher input is welcome, desired, essential. To me, if a superintendent and the principals aren't truly open to teacher input, it's the board's job to tell the superintendent to change. The hiring of the superintendent looks like the key place the board affects how teacher input is handled.

4. Is it appropriate for the school board to oppose state mandates if they run counter to the community's interests or desires and, if so, how should that be done?

FUENTES-ROHWER: The board must follow state law. However, when there are unfair/unhealthy side effects that come as a result of these laws, I believe the board has an obligation to object. In Fort Wayne, for example, the school board recognized that the A-F system of grading schools, based on standardized test scores, unfairly stigmatizes children in poverty and emphasizes a narrow view of "success." They chose to reject their letter grades. Do we as a community want to celebrate the A's our state bestows upon some of our schools? Do we then agree that the children and teachers in schools with an "F" are deserving of that grade? Our own superintendent Dr. DeMuth spoke out against the ISTEP last year. We must speak out against injustice.

SHACKELFORD: It is always appropriate to oppose a bad policy. We should not do this from a belief system, but from solid thinking. I would say we look to oppose a mandate when it runs counter to the needs of the students and community. "Interests and desires" leaves us open to following current feelings and popular educational trends, which may not line up well in every case with true needs. How should it be done? I think we speak to it in meetings, and in election races.

5. Given the importance of recess to children's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development, what are your thoughts on crafting a district wide

policy that prohibits the practice of withholding recess as a punishment in our schools or eliminating recess altogether?

FUENTES-ROHWER: I believe that all children should have the right to recess and that it should not be used for punishment. This is supported by research and by recent recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Recess should be a part of the curriculum—this unstructured play time is how children learn. But it's also true that because of state law, teachers are increasingly required to get kids to a certain level on a certain standard at a certain time—regardless of where he or she is on the developmental continuum. We need to have a strong recess policy that ensures every child has the right to recess. And we also must recognize that teachers need help with behavior management and the pressure of test scores.

SHACKELFORD: I'd leave it mainly to teachers, principals, and the superintendent, if a policy is to be written on this. My thought is that a child should not miss more than a few recesses per year. But it strikes me as micro-managing to tell teachers they can never keep someone in at recess. The best classroom managers I've worked with didn't do this at all, which argues that it is unnecessary. Good management is never about punishment, never. Yet we do look for ways to steer people in the right direction, and keeping someone in for one recess is like keeping a football player off the field for a game. I don't see it as punitive, if the adult is on target.