

D64 Schoolboard Candidate questions and responses

Preamble: For decades efforts have been started in schools by organizations like SWANCC (Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County), Go Green Park Ridge, as well as teachers and parents. Grants were given, hands on assistance and educational tools were provided (by SWANCC). Efforts were largely spearheaded by the PTO/PTA Environmental Committees and teachers. Years later, without district oversight, these initiatives have started and stopped depending on the interest of parents and teachers.

1. What is your vision for a Sustainable School District?

Francine D'Amico: PTOs/PTA's within the district offer opportunities for parents to connect with their local schools through board or committee service. Each PTO/PTA's focus reflects the parents' direct input as well as the traditions unique to each school. I think this is the best way for parents and students to bring their unique perspective of sustainability to each school within the district.

Rachel Georgakis: As a prospective board member, I believe that a board's role is ensuring that systems are in place to continue and improve our sustainability efforts. While sustainable school practices are not my area of expertise, when we don't have strong systems in place we see programs and initiatives come and go as they are people versus system centered. At the January board meeting, I was inspired by the work of the Lincoln Green Team. I'd love to see us have a model for this across the district. A district focused on sustainability should partner with educators, leaders in sustainability practices in schools, students, and other stakeholders to audit our current practices, identify areas of growth, and create a systemic implementation plan.

Bryan Mercado: I think that sustainability measures are extremely important for D64. Moving to a greener more Sustainable School District benefits everyone. I have had the opportunity to participate in numerous Habitat for Humanity house builds that adopted LEED and USGBC guidelines. When I arrived at my first LEED/USGBC build I was pessimistic, but I was amazed at what was accomplished by my Habitat team when we were bought into being sustainably aware as apposed to previous wasteful building practices. I think that one of the major stumbling blocks in achieving a Sustainable School District is not getting stakeholder buy-in, from the Superintendent to the Students it crucial to the project success. Our Students have proven time and time again that they can achieve great things when they are bought in and have great leaders supporting and encouraging them, just look at what Emerson and Lincoln did with St. Baldrick's in 2022. The vision should be endless and improving, year after year.

Monica Milligan: My hope is that the board will work closely with the new Superintendent to realize the environmental goals outlined in the District's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan, helping the district make meaningful progress toward reducing the district's climate impact and actively equipping students to advance a more sustainable future. Additionally, as we write the next district strategic plan (i.e., 2026-2031), my hope is that we build upon this momentum and set even more rigorous goals for sustainability in the future.

Over time, my vision is for

- Community members to see the critical need for this work and advocate for it in each strategic planning process

- The district to engage in sustained efforts to reduce our environmental impact so that over time, environmental considerations become a default lens we bring to all aspects of district operations
- The work to not dependent on a single parent or community member, but embedded in district practices
- The district to prioritize resources for this effort as it juggles many critical priorities and commitments to students

Denise Pearl: One of the pivotal components of a sustainable school district is the PEOPLE. It is imperative that members of the D64 community feel empowered to advocate for sustainability. With this perspective in mind, constituents will be more apt to “buying into” a vision for sustainability if they are involved in the process for creating this vision. Related, students, staff, and possibly parents would be knowledgeable about sustainability issues if these were integrated into the science curriculum. I can also see collaboration on this vision of sustainability with Park Ridge’s Sustainability Commission and the newly budgeted sustainability staff member in the Park Ridge Park District. Currently, the D64 superintendent is supportive of sustainability and, therefore “walks the talk”; however, it is uncertain if this will be a priority for the new district leader. I would want this to be the case, but I represent only one voice on the board. Once the vision for sustainability is implemented into the district, it will take time and deliberate focus to become part of the D64 culture, but I am confident that this progress can happen.

Here are some ideas of sustainability practices that might be integrated into the district vision from my perspective:

- Trash/recycling bin auditing currently occurs at Maine South through an environmentally focused student group. When my youngest daughter was at Field Elementary, she completed a research project on the topic of sustainability and some of her information was gleaned through interview with Amy Bartucci. Then, Dina Pappas, the Field PTO, and SCARCE (School & Community Assistance with Recycling and Composting Education) joined forces with Jenna to organize her classmates and parent volunteers to participate in a waste audit from the lunchrooms at Field. As one of the volunteers, I realized how this “hand-on” experience was beneficial in promoting more environmental practices.
- Sunlight has all sorts of benefits including a natural heat source. With the construction additions in D64 last year, the number of windows and the amount of sunlight were involved in the design plans.
- Recently, several of the elementary school PTO/A’s, in collaboration with the administration, have created fundraising goals for outdoor learning spaces. When these spaces are created, it seems natural for the topic of sustainability to be discussed in an outdoor environment.
- A sustainability effort called the “walking school bus” was implemented at our former school district, which not only reduces fuel usage, but helps children become more independent and socialize with students of varying ages in their neighborhood. Parent volunteers are needed for this program to function, but this program offers the possibility of reducing household stress affected by the rush to get out the door and into the car for the morning drop-off!

Matthew Doubleday: I don't yet have a vision for a Sustainable School District. I support the obvious efforts - energy efficiency, recycling, etc. - but don't feel educated enough beyond that. I'd appreciate hearing Go Green Park Ridge's thoughts.

Carol Sales: A sustainable district would have environmental awareness and sustainability integrated within the curriculum and culture. We would follow the strategic plan goal of maximizing resources for sustainability in connection with both major projects and with everyday school life.

2. How can the Board institutionalize it's/the environmental goals written in the District's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan?

- **Increase energy efficiency of facilities.**
- **Complete a curriculum review to improve "green" educational experiences and implement systematized "green" practices.**

Francine D'Amico: I think it's important to review the current conditions of our facilities and what metrics were referenced to establish the need to increase efficiencies as well as the financial implications involved before I can comment on the implementation of this goal.

I think it's important to understand what is meant by "implement systematized green practices" by the planners as well as where these practices are being sourced from before I can comment on the implementation of this goal.

Rachel Georgakis: I was glad to see the 2021-2026 Strategic Plan include environmental goals. I am concerned how the current instability in District 64 will impact our ability to achieve these goals. Once a new superintendent is hired they can choose to follow the current strategic plan or begin the process of creating and implementing a new one. If the latter is chosen, I hope that it does not stall the progress that our current administration is making. The board should collaborate with the new superintendent in regards to these priorities. One option for the board to explore is researching other area districts' board policies regarding sustainability and consider if these would be appropriate to adopt in D64.

Bryan Mercado: The district's current Strategic Plan is vague with no specific goals, no specific benchmark dates and no specific measurement plan to gauge the progress for these goals. I learned long ago that to be successful with your goals, you need to first set clear and specific realistic goals, track your path to those goals and adjust as need to obtain those goals and not alter the goals because they are difficult to obtain. If you follow and communicate these basic principal's all stakeholder's will be well informed while working together to accomplish the goals and know exactly where we are in achieving the goals.

Monica Milligan: After the strategic plan is set, I believe the board's role is to

- Ensure the district has the resources it needs to realize its goals
- Monitor progress toward the goals and support refinements to our approach if needed
- Approve policies aligned to the goals

Given that, at a high-level, I would be interested in utilizing these board levers (i.e., funding alignment, progress monitoring, and policy approval) to help ensure we are furthering all aspects of the strategic plan, including these critical sustainability goals.

More specifically, I believe that there are a lot of best practices from schools and districts across the country that can be leveraged to creatively support these goals. There are examples of districts who have utilized government grants and/or business partnerships to fund energy efficiency investments. There are also examples of simple process changes that have netted notable reductions in food waste, improvements in recycling practices, and thoughtful integration of green lessons into the broader student experience. As a board member, I would want to ensure we were leveraging these best practices as we sought to move these priorities forward.

Denise Pearl: Regarding D64's current strategic plan, I expressed interest and was selected to serve as one of the two board members on the committee responsible for its development. Therefore, I am an advocate for the *process* used to create the plan, and the strategic plan *product* that resulted from the collaboration between this committee and the administration. Sustainability was not included in the district's previous strategic plan and, therefore, was not prioritized with time, resources, and funding. Since progress on the strategic plan is transparently communicated on the district website, I periodically visit this page to provide feedback to Dr. Olson about progress on the initiatives with the understanding that timelines might need to be adjusted if more pressing district needs arise.

Additionally, I supported the recent construction project with additions at each of the elementary schools instigated by the approval of full-day kindergarten. In the planning stages of the project, I favored the installation of motion-detected light sensors in the new classrooms. Additionally, the HVAC systems that were installed are designed to run much more efficiently, ultimately resulting in cost-savings for the district. Although permitting from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) is required, I support the water retention efforts completed with the construction projects since this should alleviate some of the flooding issues in parts of our community. Lastly, "reusing" and "repurposing" was a model discussed when initial plans were shared with the board during a tour of the elementary buildings in the Fall of 2021. For example, lockers that were removed prior to construction were painted and then re-used in the newly built hallways. Additionally, the organization that provides legal services to the board generously donated their office furniture to the district staff before the law firm related to a new location.

When curriculums are reviewed in the district, a standard collaborative process involving a committee of staff members from varying levels of the organization is followed. Although board members are welcome to join these committees, the staff is more educated and knowledgeable about curriculum development and student learning. Typically, after a curriculum review is completed, this is shared with the board at a regular meeting. The board then can ask questions and provide feedback to ensure that proposed "green" educational practices would be implemented with due diligence. From a broader perspective, the board receives updates about the progress on the strategic plan and is encouraged to ask specific questions about the execution of the plan.

Matthew Doubleday: The easiest way to accomplish this goal is to prove the financial benefit. If the savings created by the new efficiencies exceed the initial costs, it is an easy decision to make. If not, it is a larger conversation that requires the Board to balance its fiscal responsibilities, the academic needs of the district and the desired sustainability goals.

When it comes to curriculum, the Board relies on the educational professionals within the district. In this case, I would expect the Science departments at our schools to embrace this challenge. Additionally, the Board may look to Go Green Park Ridge and other interested groups to help our science educators identify resources and sources of potential grants to accomplish this goal.

Carol Sales: The board can institutionalize these goals when it approves the hiring of professionals, service contracts, and projects under the facilities plan. For example, the board institutionalized its environmental goal of increasing the energy efficiency of facilities when it directed the superintendent on August 12, 2021 “to prepare a request for proposal for architectural services for the [kindergarten] project in line with our vision and goals under the strategic plan including but not limited to sustainability” and again when the board approved the new architect that prioritizes sustainability (Wight and Company) on January 26, 2023. The board can also support the creation of an action plan that aligns with Board Policy 6:60, which requires environmental curricula, and revise Policy 4:150 to emphasize green infrastructure practices.

3. Districts across the region are hiring Sustainability Directors. Do you see this position as important for D64? Why or why not?

Francine D’Amico: One of the responsibilities of a board member is to be a good financial steward of communities' tax dollars. In this current climate, teachers and teacher's assistants are in high demand and parents are stretching their budgets to pay for supplemental tutors for their children who are falling behind in core curriculum subjects. The District should ensure the tax dollars spent go towards giving students, especially those who need additional assistance, the resources they need to achieve their maximum academic potential.

Rachel Georgakis: While the goal of hiring a Sustainability Director for D64 is a laudable one, I am not sure it is financially feasible at this time. I certainly see value in what this position offers as D64 could benefit from systems work around sustainability. I’d like to learn what tasks Sustainability Directors are taking on in nearby districts and see how our district may be able to incorporate those objectives into existing roles.

Bryan Mercado: I think every option to achieve a Sustainable School District should be on the table. I do not know enough about the cost, duties and responsibilities of a Sustainability Director would be, however I do fee that this is an important initiative and should be looked at and made a priority.

Monica Milligan: I believe that it is important to embed sustainability practices as well as a “sustainability lens” into our district so that work on these strategic priorities are not dependent

on a single parent or community volunteer. And I would be open to the idea of hiring a Sustainability Director if the new Superintendent believed it was critical to the realization of the strategic plan and it made sense financially for the district. I would also be open to the new Superintendent recommending other approaches to embedding sustainability practices into the district.

As a board member, I want to focus on the overall realization of the goals outlined in the strategic plan vs. dictating a specific staffing plan for the Superintendent to follow.

Denise Pearl: When a district hires a Sustainability Director, there is an individual who specifically and explicitly leads sustainability for D64. I can see how this is advantageous; however, the role of leading sustainability might also be integrated into the job description of a current district central office position. I use the term “integrated” and not “added” since I do not believe it would be beneficial to simply add leading sustainability efforts to a district role that is already “overloaded”. As a board member, though, I trust the superintendent and administration to analyze and allocate workloads appropriately in the district. In my role as a board member in providing district oversight, I would approve sustainability efforts as recommended by the administration. Related, for sustainability to be ingrained into the culture of D64, there needs to be a central office support. This is for two main reasons. First, currently in the district, individual schools such as Lincoln Middle School, practice sustainability efforts more than other schools since teachers have championed these initiatives. Secondly, when I was the Emerson Middle School PTO President from 2016-2019, volunteers from the different schools organized with the goal of composting and recycling in the lunchrooms. After several meetings with dedicated parent volunteers from the different D64 schools, our committee came to the realization that parent volunteers are only involved in each school for a limited time. Therefore, staff member “buy in” is important at the school and district levels for sustainable change on sustainability.

Matthew Doubleday: need a better understanding of what the Sustainability Directors in other districts are doing. In the short term, I don't know that there would be enough need to justify a full-time position. Additionally, I would hesitate funding a position like this, as there are academic staffing needs within the district that should always take priority.

Carol Sales: This position would be important for the district to provide for consistency and to ensure that an individual remains focused on the strategic plan's goals. If possible, the director could be a person who's already employed by the district and is willing to accept an additional role.