

SOS Reporter

“ Save Our Schools By Supporting Our Schools “

S.B. Election Issue

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES NEWSLETTER

Vol. 1 Num. 6

S.O.S. Asks Candidates Questions

S.O.S. requested that each of the candidates in the Des Moines School Board election submit answers to important questions which concern citizens and S.O.S. Members. The follow questions and answers were exchanged during September 6 through September 10, 2005

Question: Do you support closing neighborhood schools?

Response:

Borgen – NO - We have a strong tradition of neighborhood schools which we want to keep. Nearly all our schools are neighborhood schools and I want to keep it that way. Still, as populations shift, some buildings may need to merge, but they still will be neighborhood schools. Our neighborhood schools are smaller than almost all suburban schools.

Patch - NO - Schools hold neighborhoods together; help hold property values up, gives flexibility to and programs such as all day kindergarten and preschool programs.

Neighborhood schools also host neighborhood programs, provide space for public political purposes, and after school activities.

Howland - NO

McCormick - NO, the ONLY time a building should be closed is if the building is unsafe and beyond repair!

Murphy - NO. Sometimes it might be necessary, but not recently. Neighborhood schools are resources for families and communities. Even though schools in suburbs are larger, they are still neighborhood schools.

Narcisse - NO

Strong - YES - only if fiscally required

Woods – NO

Regarding fiscal management:

Question: Do you approve School Board expenditures of I.o.s.t. levy funds to date?

Response:

Borgen – YES - We have 22 projects completed and in progress. They are all energy efficient, air conditioned schools designed with the participation of individual site teams.

Patch - NO

Howland - YES and NO

McCormick - NO, as you are aware by my comments at various forums. Too much money has been foolishly spent!

Murphy - NO. They have purchased buildings that have added nothing to teaching and learning and have closed schools that do help teaching and learning.

Narcisse - NO

Strong - YES

Woods - NO, they should have reevaluated the plan.

Continued on Next Page

Question: Do you support proposed uses of levy funds approved on July 12, 2005?

Response:

Borgen - YES, although there are still many decisions to be made regarding nearly all of these projects.

Patch - NO - I do not approve of the fragmenting Central Campus programs. The Papajohn Center is not suitable for High School Programs.

Howland - YES

McCormick - NO, absolutely not!!!

Murphy - NO. Building on to the PappaJohn center is wasteful. I support a career and vocational center but not on the Edmunds site and I would collaborate with our suburbs to share in the expense of building a metro career and vocational center, thus reducing our expenses.

Narcisse - NO

Strong - YES

Woods - NO

Question: Should the School Board seek additional funding for infrastructure either in a special school bond issue or an extension of the l.o.s.t .levy to the voters?

Response:

Borgen – YES - I think most people prefer the 1% sales tax to higher property taxes but we will need to hear from all segments of the community before the decision is made.

Patch - YES - We are short of funds to do all the needed renovations. A Bond issue will prevent wild spending like the Papajohn Center addition. But to have the citizens of Des Moines willing to pass any additional funding, the Board will need to regain the community trust. Des Moines schools must have sound fiscal policy in which the Administration is held accountable to the Board and most importantly the public.

Howland – YES - An extension of the 1% sales tax should have been proposed to the public and discussed before any school closings should have even been considered

McCormick – YES - extension of the l.o.s.t. levy would be the better of the two because there is no way the public will support a bond issue (although I don't think they will support an extension of the l.o.s.t. either due to lack of trust). It would be best for Iowa to increase the state sales tax by one or two cents. These additional monies should be set aside for our schools. Many states have higher sales tax than we do.

The state also needs to keep its promise to Iowans — monies from gambling and the lottery must go to education, rather than private businesses.

Murphy - Bonding would require that administrators follow the bonding plan. That is good, but I would like the state to take responsibility for funding infrastructure. Ninety counties are already doing it and it takes too much time and effort for them to hold elections on the local option tax. A majority of other states are involved in infrastructure maintenance. I support the state taking responsibility by continuing the current penny tax and not adding more to it.

Narcisse - No. Only after we fire the current Superintendent. To seek additional funding now would strain credibility.

Strong – YES - **Extension of L.O.S.T.**

Woods - Yes, They need to find funding to finish the projects. However, I don't think we could pass a bond or levy issue with the current administration.

Continued on Next Page

Regarding public involvement:

Question: Should the School Board, without voter approval build, or otherwise acquire, new school buildings?

Response:

Borgen – NO - Both bonds and the 1% sales tax require voter approval, so would not be possible even if the board wanted to. Perhaps if a building was given to the district, that could be accepted without approval

Patch - NO - Community approval should be required. The schools are owned by the community, maintained by community funding, and depend on community involvement. To change neighborhood schools we need neighborhood input and approval.

Howland - NO

McCormick - NO, due to unwise spending by the board, the public must be involved. Voting on these issues would allow the taxpayers to make these decisions, since the board cannot be trusted.

Murphy - YES. The school board has to be trustworthy first. We as citizens can't afford time and expense of voting on new buildings. We can vote for school board members who will be fiscally responsible and put the interests of our students first.

Narcisse - No. Trust must be restored.

Strong - YES Voters elect Directors who are empowered under Iowa law to provide for building space unless the funding is a bond issue.

Woods - NO

Question: Do you believe that public trust in the DMPS leadership has eroded?

Response:

Borgen – NO RESPONSE

Patch - YES - almost completely.

Howland - YES

McCormick - YES Worse than eroded, it no longer exists. New board members and a different superintendent need to be in place to re-establish any trust. Even then it is going to take time. We must continue the work of electing new board members until all members of the current board have been replaced.

Murphy - YES

Narcisse - YES. Erosion is the wrong word. Trust is gone. The people want a change.

Strong - YES - There is a public impression that trust has been eroded. That's why I support measures such as a 180 day notice before a school is closed to make sure that there has been adequate public comment and input to the board.

Woods - YES

Continued on Next Page

Regarding educational policy and practices:

Question: Do you believe teacher morale is seriously eroded?

Response:

Borgen - YES and NO - I do hear from some teachers who (quite understandably) feel discouraged by large classes, challenging students and new pressures. I am also in many Des Moines classrooms, schools and professional development sessions where teachers are excited and energized about their work. Teachers are individuals; we need to respect and hear their differing views and not ever assume that everyone thinks alike.

Patch - YES - Teachers are leaving the district, taking time off, and some are reported to take Prozac just to survive

Howland – YES

McCormick - YES (although DMEA President, Alan Young, feels it is more teacher “frustration” and several candidates will probably start using this term)

Murphy - YES

Narcisse - Yes. Although erosion is not the word. Teacher morale has been savaged.

Strong - YES These are tough times in which to teach. No Child Left Behind requirements have resulted in teaching that by necessity emphasizes successful test taking.

Woods - YES

Question: Are sufficient teachers and support personnel in the majority of DM schools?

Response:

Borgen – NO - The absence of library staff alone means we are not staffed as fully as we want to be. Some Smoother Sailing counselors were lost; some principals are shared; art and music is offered fewer hours than before the cuts. I am hopeful that with slightly more funds available in the next budget cycle, we can begin to restore these positions.

Patch - NO - Not when Wallace Elementary has 33 in each kindergarten class, and Lovejoy has 28 / 29 in upper grades, and some are B.D., while others don't know English.

Howland - NO

McCormick - NO - (although shifting of teachers will be done soon — after the final student count is done on 9/15) I personally feel the “reading/math coaches” would be more effective as classroom teachers, thereby reducing class size. If a teacher does not know how to teach reading/math without the help of a coach, that teacher really should not be teaching!

Murphy - NO

Narcisse – NO - We need fewer administrators and more teachers and support plans. At our site: reformiowaeducation.com we discuss this extensively.

Strong - NO - The State budget cuts of 3 years ago have left our schools short staffed & a problem which needs correction as state funding increases.

Woods - NO

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Question: Does the present curriculum meet the needs of all students?

Response:

Borgen – YES - The curriculum in DMPS is amazingly broad and deep. Never-the-less, it is constantly being evaluated and updated to be sure it is responsive to student needs and changing conditions.

Patch - NO - Unfortunately the District continues to remove from the curriculum and limits student access to art, music, and industrial arts classes. All Students must receive the best educational opportunities possible.

Howland - NO

McCormick - NO!! This is a real issue with me as you know from the forums.

Murphy - NO. This would require a book.

Narcisse - No. It doesn't meet the needs of most students. We have a 75-80% academic failure rate and our curriculum is little more now than teaching the tests except for the elite students.

Strong - NO - Test scores indicate that we have a number of students not mastering the basics. This is why we need to work hard to close achievement gaps and increase graduation rates.

Woods - NO

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Issues At A Glance	Borgen	Patch	Howland	McCormick	Murphy	Narcisse	Strong	Woods
Do you support closing neighborhood schools?	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
Do you approve School Board expenditures of I.o.s.t. levy funds to date?	Y	N	Y/N	N	N	N	Y	N
Do you support proposed uses of levy funds approved on July 12, 2005?	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N
Should the School Board seek additional funding for infrastructure either in a special school bond issue or an extension of the I.o.s.t. levy to the voters?	Y	Y	Y	Y		N	Y	Y
Should the School Board, without voter approval build, or otherwise acquire, new school buildings?	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N
Do you believe that public trust in the DMPS leadership has eroded?	NR	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Do you believe teacher morale is seriously eroded?	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Are sufficient teachers and support personnel in the majority of DM schools?	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Does the present curriculum meet the needs of all students?	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N

Question: How would immediate intervention for failing students be accomplished?

Response:

Borgen - Prompt intervention using such strategies as: math plus, reading plus before and after school help, regular (trained) volunteers to work with students and assist teachers, peer tutoring, cooperation with community agencies to provide tutoring and other services outside the regular school day. I feel that the first alternative mentioned, using existing staff, would place too large a burden on staff who generally already have a heavy load. The 2nd alternative, having outside teams, might not be received well by teachers and would be costly.

Patch - With existing professional staff in each school w/ additional funding from the State.

Howland - With increased funding for our current teachers and additional teachers to lower classroom sizes. This funding can easily be found by reducing and eliminating a large amount of administrative bloat as well as correctly managing spending on projects.

McCormick - Immediate intervention must be immediate, not waiting until summer or transitioning from elementary to middle school or from middle school to high school. Parents must be informed at once by the teacher. A conference must take place. The teacher and family should work as a team to help the student, realizing there is not “one” right plan because each situation is different. Classroom teachers need to be allowed to keep students after school or have them come to school early to provide individual help. Garton Elementary has a “homework club”. The sponsors (two teachers) of this club are available to provide extra help (this would be beneficial if parents are unable to provide help at home). This has proven to be quite successful. Classroom teachers would be best to address this question. Given the right to be involved, teachers can many times come up with creative, sensible solutions. I am certain teachers would be more than happy to provide workable ideas. While immediate means immediate, there must also be summer school (and I am not talking a 2 week little program) available to students who are failing.

Murphy - A Lot of it could be handled by allowing teachers to have more control. I don't think we need to get additional funding — we need to properly use the resources we have. There are consultants all over the place in the schools and they should be focused on better teaching rather than better testing.

Narcisse - We need major structural change beginning with frontloading and collaborative instruction. We also need to move to skill based progression and an interdisciplinary approach to learning. We also need to allocate the money at the building level. For more information go to our website at: reformiowaeducation.com.

Strong - Early detection would be identification of students needing additional core help. Immediate intervention would provide for after school tutoring, additional parental conferences and summer school. The District has started to allocate more funding for staff adjustments to focus on reading and math. Then a mentoring program involving the community is needed to provide sustained tutoring. Not enough has been done fiscally, but a start has been made and I will focus on finding additional dollars to get this job done.

Woods - with existing professional staff in each school and with the librarians and other support staff returned with additional funding provided from reductions in top-heavy administrative staff and from the State Legislature.

LEGAL UPDATE: The hearing before the Department of Education on the SOS challenge to the July 12th School Board decision to close attendance centers as a part of the Schools First Mid Program Review process is set for October 5, 2005.

The underlying function of the D.O.E. is to act in a policy-making and advisory capacity and to exercise general supervision over the state system of education including all public elementary and secondary schools. It is in this capacity that the D.O.E. will hear our appeal.

(The state department will not dictate to the School Board what its decision should have been. Only the School Board has the authority to determine which schools are to stay open.) The state department will determine whether the School Board followed the process required (to make such decisions. The process is set Out) in the D.O.E. administrative rules (and is) generally referred to as the “Barker Guidelines”. (Further

discussion of these rules will appear in the next newsletter). The remedy for failure to establish and follow such process is a reversal of the challenged decision and a remand to allow the School Board to do it right.

A local school Board's decision to close a school is not set aside lightly. In the few instances in which the D.O.E. has reversed a local school board's school closure decision, it has found the school board's actions to be substantially deficient in appropriate research, planning and public involvement. (We are deeply imbedded in) Our (meticulous) methodical review of the School Board's actions (and grow in our conviction that our case is one of just) continues to reveal substantial deficiencies in each school closing.

If you have had first-hand experience in the School Board's (Schools First Mid-Program Review process) handling of the school closings, please step forward and share your observations with us.

MORE ABOUT SOS

SaveOurSchools (SOS) began during the weekend before Memorial Day. On Friday, District administrators sent memos to principals to send home with children in five different elementary schools. These announcements referred to the proposed agenda items in the Board meeting on the following Tuesday. On the agenda was closure of five elementary schools, demolition of one and building of two new high schools among other relative actions.

Although distrust of the administration had grown since 2000 among parents on school site committees, teachers, and others who knew teachers and the problems in their own schools, this action shocked and offended people in all parts of town at the same time.

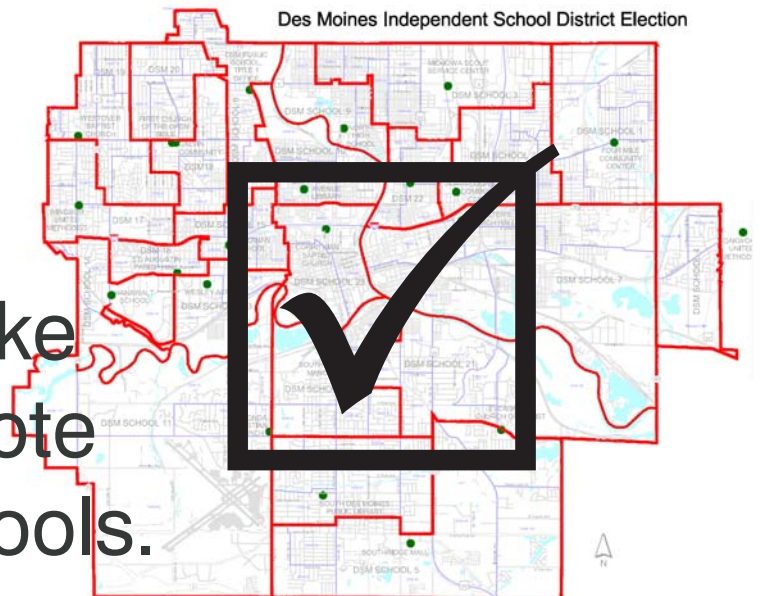
Calls went out to grand-parents, friends, city officials and activists. A Saturday evening meeting in an east-side living room brought together 12 activists from all parts of town. We rallied and scheduled another meeting. Emergency meetings were held in the five targeted schools where board members were blasted with complaints. SOS sponsored two public meetings. In three successive official School Board meetings, hundreds pleaded, objected, presented petitions, reasoned, and protested. *SOS demanded a moratorium on action until all concerned could gather solid research and participate in genuine public discussions and hearings.* On July 12, the School Board ignored us all and voted 5-2 to proceed with their plan. With our mission of reform and goals in place, SOS had 30 days to file a legal appeal (our second goal), which we did. Our hearing date is October 5, 2005.

SOS is expanding. We hope to share our mission and goals with many more individuals and groups who sincerely care about education. Our short-term goals focus on reforming current conditions. However, as soon as possible we envision working teams researching and addressing specific issues and, later, a county-wide network and system of citizen input. Our goal is education-focused planning, support to teachers, and far greater opportunities in DM K-12 education for all students.

Thanks to those of you who read this far. Please ask questions if you have them. Join us if you agree with our efforts and have not already let us know.

Nan Stillians
SOS Coordinator

Please
Vote on Tuesday,
September 13 -make
your vote count - vote
to make better schools.



This Week's SOS Reporter

- Questions for SB Candidates
- Legal Update
- More About SOS
- Please Vote!!!

- Upcoming Issues;
 - The Cotton Report
 - SOS Profiles
 - Election Review

Chair: Linda Westergaard • Coordinator: Nancy Stillians

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