



Candidates for Tulsa Public Schools Board Meet to Hear Citizen Concerns

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ACTION Tulsa hosts a meeting with candidates for the Tulsa Public Schools Board at the University of Tulsa on Jan. 27, 2024

A community organization is seeking to work with the next people who take seats on the Tulsa Public Schools Board of Education.

On Saturday, in front of a packed auditorium at the University of Tulsa, ACTION Tulsa — which bills itself as a nonprofit made up of religious and civic institutions looking to boost community engagement— brought together five candidates for TPS' board. In the audience of about 400, approximately ten Tulsa churches were represented.

ACTION Tulsa sought commitments from the candidates to work together on issues like chronic absenteeism created by lags in district transportation. To open the short discussion of each issue, a person involved in TPS shared a story.

Dania Gaona said she is the parent of three daughters who attend MacArthur Elementary near 21st Street and Sheridan Road. She said because she lives within a mile and a half of the school, her children aren't eligible for bus service and must walk or Uber.

"We Uber because I don't want my 4-year-old daughter walking the half mile alone across 21st Street where there is no crossing guard. We have many children who walk unsupervised to MacArthur across the busy intersection," said Gaona.

Most candidates agreed to work with ACTION Tulsa to resolve problems around transportation, student mental health concerns, teacher support, and school safety. District 6 candidate Maria Seidler was the only person who refused to work with the coalition on several items.

Near the end of the meeting, Seidler said she wouldn't help ACTION Tulsa prioritize school safety assessments because she found that course of action too narrow. She vowed she would never work with the group "when you come through my door with a pre-determined solution."

"These things have been debated for years across all states. None of your solutions are worthy of consideration if you're not gonna look at the data and the source. If you think an assessment once every five years is gonna keep your kids safe, then you deserve the risk it takes because every school is different on where it is and some schools may need more," said Seidler.

Seidler, who is an attorney, is also representing current board members E'Lena Ashley of District 4 and Jennettie Marshall of District 3 in their lawsuit accusing TPS and several other board members of violating the state's Open Meeting Act.

The only incumbent onstage was District 5's John Croisant who took opportunities to highlight district issues he said he's already been working to solve. On the topic of safety, Croisant said he's being proactive around Senate Bill 100 that requires school sites to do risk assessments by July 2026.

"I'm already scheduled to meet with our safety team next week to go over all the details of our safety assessment. This year, the district has already added metal detectors, additional school resource officers and security staff, along with secure entrances and advanced camera systems at every school paid for by bond dollars," said Croisant.

Croisant's opponent Teresa Peña also talked up her institutional knowledge. She said she has more than 30 years of experience as a TPS teacher and administrator.

"I know the insides better than anybody," said Peña.

In an interview with Public Radio Tulsa, Peña said she decided to run because she was frustrated by TPS' "dysfunctional board" and by its passivity after state Superintendent Ryan Walters referred to teachers unions as "terrorists."

Despite frustration with Walters, Peña is using public relations professional Charity Marcus to manage her campaign. Marcus also managed the campaign of current board member E'Lena Ashley who's appeared at several public events—including a "religious freedom rally"—with Walters.

Marcus said she met Peña by "divine intervention" and that she's excited to support an experienced teacher who might be able to "review contracts" proposed by the board. Peña said she does not share Ashley's views.

Also onstage was Calvin Moniz, a long-time Tulsan who advocates for "local control." Moniz boasts involvement in various area organizations, including Tulsa's Housing and Urban Development Community Development Committee. He says he wants to focus on STEM education and "real world preparedness."

Newcomer KanDee Washington is opposing Moniz for the District 2 seat, but Washington was absent from the event.

Rounding out the candidate pool was Sarah Smith, who's running against Seidler for the District 6 seat. Smith says she is a TPS graduate who wants to attract more teachers to Tulsa and "keep politics" out of the classroom.

Elections for the TPS board will be held Apr. 2.