

Editorial

Spectrum

Editorials, letters and opinions

Caswell, Dauber, Emberling for school board

The last time there was an election for school board in Palo Alto was five years ago, just a few months after Superintendent Kevin Skelly had been hired to bring order to the chaos created by the board's poor handling of the proposed new Mandarin Immersion program and a widespread lack of confidence in former Superintendent Mary Frances Callan.

The two top vote-getters in that 2007 election were then-challengers Melissa Baten Caswell and Barbara Klausner, while Camille Townsend, the only incumbent running, barely beat out Wynn Hausser for the third slot by 200 votes.

After the 2009 election was cancelled because no one filed to oppose incumbents Barbara Mitchell and Dana Tom, this year there is not only a competitive race but a refreshing and serious discussion of issues.

Camille Townsend seeks a third term, something that no school board member has done in more than 40 years. If successful, Townsend would set a record of 13 years on the board by the time her term expired in 2016.

Caswell, a former high-tech marketing executive, seeks a second term, while the third incumbent, Klausner, decided against running for a second term due to frustrations over the role of the board and her ability to have an impact.

The two non-incumbents in the race are Ken Dauber, a Google software engineer and former college professor with a PhD in sociology and co-founder of We Can Do Better Palo Alto, a group devoted to improving the social and emotional well-being of kids and to closing the achievement gap, and Heidi Emberling, an early childhood parent education specialist at Parents Place, a non-profit supporting families and teachers, and a former president of the Juana Briones PTA.

The last five years have seen unprecedented emotional highs and lows for the schools and the kids and parents in our community.

On the positive side, in 2008 voters overwhelmingly approved both a \$378 million bond measure and in 2010 an extension and increase of a parcel tax (to \$589/year.) These two measures have enabled badly-needed construction and renovation of new classrooms, athletic facilities and school infrastructure, and provided a steady revenue flow to stabilize district annual budgets during uncertain economic times.

The fortuitous timing of the bond measure, passed just prior to the stock market crash and the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, enabled the district to get much more favorable construction bids than expected and to stretch the dollars. Unlike with the previous bond measure, this one has been managed exceedingly well.

The school board also developed a strong strategic plan in 2008 that has actually been used to develop the district's annual goals and priorities over the last several years.

Tragedy, in the form of five teen suicides in 2009 and 2010, has had a powerful impact on the district, especially faculty, students and families at Gunn. This brought renewed examination of values and priorities and major new initiatives to address the social and emotional needs of kids and the stress caused by the high expectations of parents, peers and the school system.

The community's despair over the suicides also gave rise to Project Safety Net (PSN), a collaborative of community organizations, the city, school district and concerned individuals committed to a comprehensive response to the needs of Palo Alto youth.

We Can Do Better Palo Alto, the grass-roots group co-founded by Dauber and his wife last year, became a consistent prod to the district to make these efforts a top priority, and an advocate for using better data analysis to aid policy decisions, especially in the realm of high school counseling.

While groups in the PSN collaborative opted not to use their influence and take positions on issues in front of the school board, We Can Do Better Palo Alto advocated for measures to reduce student stress, including a change in the school calendar, a district homework policy and enforcement of designated no-homework days, and adoption of a unified counseling system modeled after the teacher advisory system used at Palo Alto High School. While its criticism and aggressive style has made some uncomfortable and put the board and superintendent on the defensive, it succeeded in bringing valuable new information, perspectives and analysis to many issues, and in creating better results.

All of the candidates in this race are thoughtful, caring parents who are committed to outstanding and rigorous academic programs and making sure our schools continue to be among the best in California and the nation. They also all acknowledge that the achievement culture in our community and the high stress it has created demand attention.

Such qualities and viewpoints do not, however, correlate with leadership or effective governance.

The current board has had five years without a change in composition, coinciding with the first five years of Superintendent Skelly's tenure with the district. Each trustee has had a turn as board president during this period, and the opportunity to work closely with Skelly in his first-time role as a district superintendent.

But rather than a steadily improving competence and confidence in its decision-making, the process of engaging the public and its oversight of the superintendent, the board has struggled with almost every important issue to come before it.

Having observed dozens of school board members and hundreds of meetings over more than 30 years, we believe the current group suffers from having neither a superintendent nor board leader who excels at formulating clear recommendations and leading effective discussions that conclude with formal motions and votes.

The result is frequently a meandering, undisciplined discussion in which each board member talks, often making useful suggestions, but that ends without clarity. The board therefore functions more like a sounding board for the staff, which must then figure out how to translate five different voices into policy.

There is no better example of this process than the board's clumsy attempts to ensure both high schools have "comparable" counseling programs. Identified as a priority four long years ago in the 2008 strategic plan, the board and superintendent's mismanagement of this process has created distrust, unclear direction and continued confusion as to just how similar the board wants the counseling programs to be. Amazingly, the board has never actually had a discussion or vote to determine whether a board majority actually favors establishing a single "best practice" counseling model, regardless of what it is, at the two high schools.

School district voters, which includes about half of Los Altos Hills, should not settle for this passive form of governance.

So which candidates are best equipped to bring improvements in the way the board operates?

We are confident only about Melissa Baten Caswell and Ken Dauber. Each of them has a firm grasp of the governance problems, is willing to assert the board's responsibility to make decisions and places a high value on transparency and parent participation. Both have experience in corporate decision-making yet acknowledge that a public institution can't run like a business and needs to build support among all stakeholders in the school community. We think together they could provide the type of board leadership that could fix many of the problems identified above.

For the third seat, we cannot support Camille Townsend, who we also declined to support when she ran for reelection four years ago.

Townsend's PTA work and her tireless efforts to beat back attempts to cut state support for Palo Alto schools back in 2002 and 2003 propelled her to victory in 2003, and no one cares more about kids and the school district.

But as much clarity as she has in private conversations about school policy, she has not brought it to the public process, where it really counts. As recent email disclosures have shown, she says one thing in public and another in private. As board president, where a trustee's influence is greatest, Townsend has consistently opted to use the role to carry the superintendent's water rather than construct meeting agendas so that important issues were teed up for a focused policy discussion and decision by the board.

Only in the most extraordinary circumstances should anyone serve three terms on a local elected body. This is not one of those times.

How Heidi Emberling will function as a board member is difficult to predict because over the years she has opted to observe meetings rather than advocate for her point of view.

She is knowledgeable, articulate and passionate, and her professional background as an early childhood education specialist would be a unique addition to the board.

She raises concerns about student stress and the social and emotional needs of students, particularly related to bullying, the lack of clarity of goals or policy options when the board is dealing with controversial issues, and the strong tilt in the district toward site-based decision-making. She believes teachers need more "cultural competence" in order to more effectively work to close the achievement gap.

A former journalist, she advocates for more transparency in district-board operations and communications. As a mother of 4th and 6th graders, she also would be a voice for parents of younger students, a rarity on the school board.

We recommend Melissa Baten Caswell, Ken Dauber and Heidi Emberling as the best group to move the school district forward.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The Palo Alto Weekly encourages comments on our coverage or on issues of local interest.

Do you think the school district should consider opening a 13th elementary school?

