

2021 School Board Candidate Questionnaire

Responses by Ebett Siddon

Briefly tell us about yourself and what motivates you to run to be a member of the School Board.

I moved to Juneau in 2002 after college to start graduate school. I have since earned a Masters and PhD in Fisheries from the University of Alaska Fairbanks at Lena Point and I currently work at NOAA's Auke Bay Labs. My husband, Chris, is also in Fisheries and works for the Alaska Department of Fish & Game and we have one son who is enrolled in the Juneau School District and attends Harborview Elementary.

I joined the School Board in 2018. In my first year on the Board, I also served on the Board of the Alaska Association of School Boards. I served as Vice President in my second year, and have been serving in the role of President of the Board this past year.

I bring a strong background in three specific areas:

1. Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (or STEAM).

I have worked in the sciences my entire adult life. I am familiar with the current landscape of scientific fields and how to prepare students for careers in those fields. I also think STEAM teaches critical thinking skills that prepares students in all subject areas.

2. Special Education.

I am the mother of a Special Education student. I am very familiar with all aspects of SPED, related services, as well as where community partner agencies intersect with the District to support our students.

Early Childhood advocacy.

I am the statewide parent representative on the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council, which oversees all state agencies serving children prenatal through age 12, and a parent representative on the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education's Early Intervention Committee.

What do you see as the major issues facing the School District and how will you address these issues during your term?

The top priority is to address the academic and social/emotional needs of students. Recovering from the academic losses incurred as a result of distance learning will take time and the needs will look different at different grades. At elementary, for example, students may need added reading or math supports. At high school, students may need credit recovery opportunities to get back on track for graduation. We also know that students' social and emotional learning is foundational to their academic successes, so I support counseling and family engagement opportunities.

How do you rate public education in the Juneau School District, and how do you believe the public rates it?

I rate public education in the Juneau School District as high and that is based on my first-hand experiences, but also because, as a School Board member, I get to see and hear about all of the amazing, creative things our teachers and staff are implementing across the District. But I would guess the public rates it as medium. Most have a narrow window into the District (either through their children only, or through interacting with students in the community) and cannot appreciate the District-wide collective efforts underfoot.

Who do you contact when you need to gather information concerning education issues?

When I want to learn more, or better understand an issue, I try to collect as much information as possible. I reach out to friends who are also parents, I reach out to teachers I know and trust, and I reach out to my family (my sister and parents are all lifelong educators). I read the news, I listen to the radio, and, yes, I read the comments section on Juneau Community Collective. My approach is iteratively broad and narrow...how are national conversations and issues funneling locally and impacting the perspectives and conversations here in Juneau.

What other public or private agencies would you collaborate with when making policy decisions for public education?

I will give two policy examples very fresh in my mind from this past year on the Board. The first is the possible adoption (final reading at our September 14 Board meeting) of a Land Acknowledgement to be read at the beginning of our Board meetings. For this process, the Policy Committee engaged with local tribal representatives and community members, listening to their input and concerns, and even paused when disagreement arose and it became clear that one step forward (even with the best of intentions) may result in two steps back.

The second example is the Board's adoption of a mask requirement. Over the past 1.5+ years, the Board has sought the advice of health professionals from the national (CDC, AAP), state (DEED and DHSS), and local (Juneau Public Health, CBJ) level while balancing student's academic and social/emotional needs.

What do you identify as the top diversity issues affecting student success in our school district, and how would you address them?

The Board has identified and prioritized equity in the Strategic Plan. It clearly outlines goals for sub-populations of students, including Alaska Native students, as well as metrics to measure our progress along the way. That said, a top diversity challenge affecting student success (and the District's ability to meet the goals outlined in the Strategic Plan), is the diversity reflected in the staff. I would like to see our staff diversity better reflect our student population diversity, so students 'see themselves' in their teachers. This is a challenge I face in my 'day job', as well, and I am involved in several grant programs and outreach opportunities to help engage, train, and develop Alaska Native students into the sciences, and I support parallel programs for teacher training and development.

What type of professional development do you support to ensure employee growth and success among teachers and support staff?

This is an excellent question, but my answer is: what type of professional development do YOU want? Professional development and growth opportunities are a chance to re-energize, to learn something new (or a new approach), and to remember what drew you to be a teacher originally. We hope to instill a love of life-long learning in our students and we should hope to fuel our staff as life-long learners, as well.

Do you support public employee unions, collective bargaining, and the right to strike? Why or why not?

Yes, I do. Unions and collective bargaining agreements protect the workers and act to advocate on behalf of all employees and protect the rights of all employees. That said, I work for a Division within NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Science Center. Interestingly (and I am not certain of the full history), historically the Auke Bay Lab division opted out of the broader Alaska Fisheries Science Center union.

Do you believe teachers in our school district are fairly compensated? Explain

Compensation includes wages and retirement/benefits, so "fairly" is likely related to which state retirement tier teachers are in, albeit largely out of the School Board's control. However, we - along with the other 'big 5' school districts in the State - have supported resolutions of the statewide Association of Alaska School Boards relating to defined benefit retirement.

I think the job of a teacher is immense and goes well beyond teaching the curriculum. And that is where, in my opinion, it is much harder to define "fairly compensated" and the age-old distinction between dollar value and societal value. If the Juneau School District wants to attract and retrain top-notch teachers, we need to demonstrate both values for them, and find ways to compensate within the constraints of the state funding formula and in ways that teachers view as valuable.

Do you believe the support professionals in our school district are fairly compensated? Explain.

Similar to above, I think the job of support professionals is immense and they face unique and dynamic challenges based on the student population they interact with. As the mother of an intensive needs student, I know all too well what we ask of support professionals and the level of responsibility we put on their shoulders. Again, I find it hard to answer whether they are "fairly" compensated, as the value of their work is much more than the salary, so balancing ways to demonstrate their value, for them to find value, in the work while also compensating within the constraints of the state funding formula.

As a Board member, my advocacy for Special Education funding includes recognition of, and appreciation for, the layers of staff who support our SPED students: teachers, related services specialists, as well as paraeducators.

What do you see as the role of School Board as it relates to the day-to-day operations of the district?

The School Board needs to understand how the district operates (i.e., through school site visits, classroom visits, updates through Board committees and committee reports, etc.) in order to fulfill our budgetary and policy responsibilities, but otherwise entrusts the day-to-day operations of the district to the Superintendent.

As a school board member, what will you do to ensure effective communication between the School District and Borough Leadership?

I believe the School District and Borough leadership currently have effective communication and we can ensure that continues through collaboration and transparency. During the past year, as Board President, I have built relationships with assembly members, with the Mayor, and with CBJ officials (e.g., COVID EOC members). At every turn, I approach conversations with honesty and transparency and I believe there is great trust among the leadership of JSD and CBJ.

In light of the state's finances and cuts to education funding, what would be your priorities for cutting and/or maintaining the budget and programs provided by our school district?

Given flat funding over the past ~decade, which is an effective budget reduction due to inflation, it is increasingly difficult to find places to cut (or even trim) in the budget. With decreased enrollment due to COVID, we will be in the second year of the 'hold harmless' clause, which will provide some buffer to budget reductions. I will prioritize maintaining PTR (pupil-teacher ratio) and support for the Reading Specialists to address academic achievement gaps.

What is your approach to attracting and retaining quality education employees?

I believe we attract and retain high quality staff by providing a supportive and dynamic workplace in a district that values its employees and encourages innovative ideas and professional development.

Which member of the current school board most represents your views, and explain why?

Is this a trick question? ;)

As a current board member, one of the greatest challenges and lessons I've learned is to "listen to understand". We all have varying opinions, or ways of expressing them, or routes for getting from point A to point B. But when conflict occurs, I refocus on the bottom line: what is in the best interest of our students.

How well do you feel the current school board has addressed the issues pertaining to education in the world of Covid-19? What do you see as having been successful, what would you change?

When the Governor closed schools in March 2020, the K-12 education system got turned upside down. The school district has moved through several phases of response (from shutdown to all virtual, hybrid, and now in-person). I am impressed at the resiliency of the system, as a whole, to continue to grow and respond to the constantly changing landscape. I am amazed by the teachers, who pivoted so quickly, and delivered education in an entirely new format. I know it was difficult and frustrating and heartbreaking to feel like students were slipping through your fingers over Zoom, and I am incredibly grateful for your collective patience and tenacity through it all!

In the current phase, we are committed to sustaining in-person learning as safely as possible. As I said above, we are following public health guidance and continually re-evaluating our mitigation strategies. One area for improvement in this current in-person phase is around how best to pivot close-contact students or classrooms to distance learning on the short-term and still provide academic support.

Information concerning your campaign: a. Who is supporting your campaign? b. How much money do you plan to spend? c. What means of campaigning are you planning to do?

a. Who is supporting your campaign?

I have been endorsed by the Juneau Central Labor Council (AFL-CIO).

b. How much money do you plan to spend?

I am running as an exempt candidate (<\$5000 raised/spent).

c. What means of campaigning are you planning to do?

My strategy is to engage with as many people as possible, as safely as possible! I have a facebook page (www.facebook.com/siddonforschoolboard) and website (www.elizabethsiddon.com/). I am attending all forums, replying to all emails, and returning all phone calls to engage with people in Juneau. I also have yard signs.

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