

NEWS

# Election 2023: South Kitsap School Board candidates differ on bond issue

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**Jeff Graham**

Kitsap Sun

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## Election 2023: South Kitsap School Board candidates differ on bond issue

Three races in South Kitsap will be decided by voters in the Nov. 7 general election.



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A 21-year, \$271 million bond measure isn't the only item for South Kitsap voters to decide on during the Nov. 7 general election. There are three South Kitsap School Board races on the ballot.

In District 1, incumbent Kate Espy faces challenger John Sehmel. Espy, a nurse, joined South Kitsap's board in 2021 after Eric Gattenby vacated his post. Sehmel is the owner/founder of several local businesses.

**Voters weighed in on the other two director races during August's primary. In District 2, Megan Higgins topped the five-candidate race with 35.7% of the vote, followed by Jaime Cross with 23%. Higgins has worked as a tutor within the district, while Cross owns a masonry business. In District 5, Jay Villars led the three-candidate race with 49% of the vote. He is a former administrator in the district who now works as a facilitator for high school accreditations. Rhonda Edwards, a longtime business owner who has also worked in real estate, was second in the primary with 36.1%.**

**The Kitsap Sun asked board candidates to submit answers to a three-part questionnaire ahead of the election.**



**Kate Espy (District 1)**

**Q: What do you feel you bring to the school board if elected?**

**A: I was appointed to the SK board in December 2021. As a result, I have more than two years of experience as a board member and as the legislative representative for the board. Thanks to my years of working with emergency patients and victims of abuse, I have learned to listen attentively to the speaker, and work to understand what they're saying even if I don't share their opinions. I also bring the experience of being a parent volunteer of two children who went through SK schools. Both graduated from SKHS.**

**Q: Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve?A: What motivated me to apply to be on the board originally and continues to motivate me to remain on the board are our students. Our focus must be on the students and what they need to receive the best education possible. This requires a high functioning board that works for the students, not individual board members' issues.**

**Q: Do you support the school board bond measure on the November ballot? Why or why not? Yes, I do support the school board bond measure. All our schools are old, even the newest ones were built more than 30 years old. We live in a world where we need to ensure that our students can focus on learning in an environment where they are safe. Building and upgrading various district facilities is paramount and passing the bond will ensure this happens.**



**John Sehmel (District 1)**

**Q: What do you feel you bring to the school board if elected?**

**A: I would bring sound judgment, experience in planning and executing projects, and strategies for increasing revenue. I am a man of action – I don't just talk; I get things done. Foundational to my approach is my belief in the Bible, belief in God as the Creator and ultimate Authority, and desire to see the Constitution upheld.**

**Q: Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve?**

**A: I believe that our school system is under attack by hidden agendas that allow for chaos and confusion. My primary motivator to serve on the school board is the protection of children and therefore society at-large from these radical and destructive ideologies which threaten our society.**

**Q: Do you support the school board bond measure on the November ballot? Why or why not?**

**A: I do not support the bond for several reasons. First, I do not believe the board has done their due diligence in researching/planning to realistically accomplish what the bond is purporting. Second, I think the timeline required to complete the projects has been misrepresented, which will cost a lot in extra interest. Also, if permits for these proposed projects are denied, it is then up to the board to determine how to allocate the funds. I do not have confidence in the current board's ability to manage resources wisely, as the South Kitsap Pool renovation project has been grossly mis-budgeted. I think a better plan is to take on one smaller project at a time.**



**Megan Higgins (District 2)**

**Q: What do you feel you would bring to the school board if elected?**

**A: I will bring calm and reasonable discussion to the board. I'm level-headed and able to take various opinions into consideration. I believe a school board should be made up of people from a variety of backgrounds that represent our community. No one currently on the board has elementary-aged kids, which is something I can bring to the table. I believe the board needs to be able to come together to make decisions; I am committed to be a reasonable person finding solutions for our schools.**

**Q: Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve?**

**A: My motivation to serve is to make sure our kids go to schools that are safe, accessible to everyone, and where they can get a quality education. Our kids need a great education to help equip them with the skills they need to succeed in life, with their families, and in their careers. I will always be a strong advocate for a quality education.**

**Q: Do you support the school board bond measure on the November ballot? Why or why not?**

**A: I do support the bond! I want our kids in South Kitsap to be safe. We have buildings that are leaking, sinking, and many are so small that our kids are in portable classrooms. Heating and cooling systems are failing. Our kids deserve buildings where they have**

**access to water and bathrooms if they need to shelter in place for an emergency. The last time we built a new building in the district was over 30 years ago. It is time for some much needed maintenance and upgrades to keep our schools places where our kids are safe and can learn. I have spoken with many people in the community and no one disputes that our schools need help. This isn't an excessive bond, it is what is needed to take care of the needs of the kids.**



**Jaime Cross (District 2)**

**Q: What do you feel you would bring to the school board if elected?**

**A: Focus on practical education. Solving budgetary issues. Protecting parental rights.**

**Q: Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve?**

**A: The decline in academic standards which must be a top priority. For instance, 70% of third-graders at SKSD do not meet reading standards. This is very alarming and must be a top priority. We must also stop the school district from its continuous overstepping of parents rights, such as mandatory masking, and stop the early sexualization and genderization being forced upon our children. Gender-affirming education has no place in public schools, going as far as keeping secret files on children and forcing teachers to hide students identity while at school from their parents, also allowing biological males to use females bathrooms/locker rooms, which denies biological females safe space. It contradicts customary social and family values.**

**Q: Do you support the school bond measure on the November ballot? Why or why not?**

**A: No. Because I disagree with how this bond was put together. No outside consultants were sought. There was zero due diligence performed in planning. There was no feasibility or environmental studies were performed in any of the three years of planning. The current bond will only solve a fraction of the ongoing issues of the overcrowding of the existing high school while building two new elementary schools that have the lowest**



**enrollment in the district. There are many unidentified projects and planned projects that lack sufficient detail. Students and teachers in the South Kitsap School District are facing many challenges due to excessive governmental interference. Government overreach into curriculum, staffing, and health mandates have created a system that operates in the best interest of the system, not the best interest of the students. Many parents have lost trust in our school system due to ideologies and theories being taught with the curriculum at the demand of politicians, not educators or parents. Because of this, enrollment is down, which is causing budgetary issues resulting in a situation where staffing cuts must be made and dedicated teachers will have to be let go. We MUST do better for our children and their future. Now is the time to come together as a community and be sure our children's educational needs are being met and our voices are being heard!**



**Jay Villars (District 5)**

**Q: What do you feel you would bring to the school board if elected?**

**A: I am a dedicated school leader with 38 years of experience in public education. Twenty years in the South Kitsap School District where I held the positions of Deputy Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and Junior High Principal. Prior to my service in South Kitsap I held the following educator positions: Classroom teacher, Special Education Teacher, Activities Director, Theater Arts Director, Department Chair and Assistant Principal. Currently, I am a coach/facilitator for High School Accreditations throughout the state. My experience in the educational system has afforded me the opportunity to evaluate Teachers, Principals and District Office Administrators. My goal has always been to support them by supporting their growth which then leads to growth in student and teacher success. I would keep the vision and goals of the school district in the forefront. I would be mindful of these issues when making decisions. I would also be present at many events to show support. Additionally, I would work as a collaborative leader keeping the interests of all of these groups including the community in mind.**

**Q: Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve?**

**A: Student achievement and their success is the most important issue. However, my top three concerns help support students achievement. We need to look for ways to provide resources for our schools. Resources for staff development that supports our goals is imperative to move forward. Finding resources to improve our facilities so that our students have the best and state of the art experiences. This will allow them to compete with others in our globally connected world. We need to work together as a community and partner with the school district so that we can provide these resources for our students. I am an empathetic and collaborative leader. I strive to use good judgment and common sense. My experience allows me to understand the positive and negatives of our educational system. Through my leadership I would protect diversity, equality and inclusion so that our school community can grow and improve.**

**Q: Do you support the school board bond measure on the November ballot? Why or why not?**

**A: I support the upcoming bond. We need to come together as a community and make sure our schools have the resources they need. We need to start providing a stable financial situation for our schools so that they can plan consistently and productively and know that the community will support them and provide them what they need. This bond measure allows us to replace and repair a variety of options across the district.**



**Rhonda Edwards (District 5)**

**Q: What do I feel I would bring to the school board if elected?A: I will bring a fresh perspective with experience as a successful business owner the last 35 years in Kitsap County. The school district is the largest employer in Port Orchard and oversees a budget of \$275 million. I will use common sense, collaboration skills, and analytical reasoning to look at problems and come up with solutions. As a business owner, I survived the ups and downs of the economy by being prepared with reserves, plans of action, and thinking out of the box in order to keep the doors opened. I will bring financial accountability and build bridges of trust with parents, taxpayers, and our students. Our school enrollment shows a loss of 1,052 students, which translates to \$18 million loss of revenue. Parents are choosing private schools or home-schooling when possible. The district has not initiated exit surveys to determine exact reasons why they left. We must acknowledge the failures before we can initiate change. Rather than “hoping” that things turn around, I would proactively engage with the community on this issue and many others. I will be available, engaged, and look forward to working with parents. Kids Come First .... Always! Connect with me at [www.Edwards4SKSchools.com](http://www.Edwards4SKSchools.com).**

**Q: Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve?**

**A: I have a heart for kids! They are our future and it imperative that they have a stellar education. Our students continue to suffer from the catastrophic school closures which caused stress and severe learning loss. My candidacy is motivated by attending school board meetings and learning of our district’s low-test scores. For example, just 38% of third-grade students could read at third-grade level in June. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child’s educational development, which means 62% of the third-grade students will be less likely to advance in their education, and this failure will be amplified as they move through the school system. This leads to negative self-esteem and reduces the chance of graduating by 25%. The 38% of kids that can read at third-grade level is an average of the 10 elementary schools. Our kids' test scores show that they are in the bottom 30% of all schools in the nation. The low-test scores across all subjects is not preparing our students for graduation, college, jobs, or trade schools. What is being done? What questions are being asked? We can fix this problem!**

**Q: Do you support the school board bond measure on the November ballot? Why or why not?**

**A: I receive daily news from WSSDA (Washington State School Directors Association). They wrote several articles advocating for school consolidations. North Kitsap and Bellevue are successful examples. I attended the bond meetings and asked questions. Why would we spend \$96 million for a new school at Olalla Elementary and South Colby with each school only serving approximately 270 students, when we could consolidate with other existing schools or build one new school off Banner Road since the district owns a 15-acre parcel there? Why would we spend another \$96 million on building Cedar Heights on the same parcel of land when the existing school has sunk five feet? The district**



**purchased 30-plus acres west of Highway 16, which would be perfect for Cedar Heights and a new high school like the Central Kitsap project recently completed. Another factor to consider; 3 of the 4 projects proposed have major environmental issues, ranging from salmon-bearing streams, wetlands, soil issues, septic and drainfields, etc. Why didn't the district complete a feasibility before writing this bond? I absolutely support a future bond and look forward to being a part of the planning process. I represent the voters and should the bond pass, I will make sure every dollar is spent wisely.**