

Election 2019: High interest draws crowded field in South Kitsap board races

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SOUTH KITSAP — Three races for South Kitsap school board drew eight candidates, with two races going to the August primary.

Given that historically in South Kitsap, most school board races go uncontested, 2019 was a year of high interest in district elections.

The district has a new superintendent, Tim Winter, [who sees the South Kitsap's star rising \(/story/news/local/2019/08/23/new-south-kitsap-superintendent-for-long-haul/2088277001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/08/23/new-south-kitsap-superintendent-for-long-haul/2088277001/). The district is realigning its programs to improve academic achievement and rebooting its special education program. [A community-led movement is stirring renewed pride in South Kitsap schools \(/story/news/local/2019/08/30/show-your-wolf-flag-movement-sparks-renewed-pride-skhs/2168404001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/08/30/show-your-wolf-flag-movement-sparks-renewed-pride-skhs/2168404001/).

But challenges remain. The district has run four bonds for a second high school since 2016; all failed, although a capital levy for deferred maintenance passed in 2018. The possibility of layoffs arose this spring, but the school board avoided them by leaving most vacated positions unfilled and tapping the district's savings.

Here's what candidates said about budgeting, bonds and building on the district's successes.

Position 1

Name: Keith Law

Age: 60

Current employment: Safeway

Q: What's one activity you enjoy doing in South Kitsap Schools?

A: "I have been a chaperone for field trips and I enjoyed those activities."

Q: Should the district run a capital measure in the next four years, and if so, what should it look like?

A: Voters have spoken "loud and clear" — no second high school, Law says. He is concerned about costs to operate the school. "I think that there is no question we need a new school, but not another school like they proposed." Now is not the time to ask voters to approve higher taxes, when increased property values have pushed tax bills higher, Law says. "The county is the recipient of this windfall money and we need to look towards them for any capital measures."

Q: How can the district achieve better fiscal stability?

A: When Law was in high school, budget issues forced cutting extracurricular activities and busing. "We were given the option if we wanted to participate in sports, first, we had to raise the money for all the busing. ... It sounds harsh, but when we stood on the top level of the award podium at state, we knew we earned it. ... I don't expect the students to do that now. We're going to make it work one way or another."

Q: What are South Kitsap schools doing right and how would you build on that success?

A: "I think they are doing an excellent job on security. Our children's safety and education should be top priority. To build upon it, I would have no problem with having a teacher in each school who is deputized and trained, and given the necessary tools to handle any kind of threat."

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Name: Eric Gattenby (incumbent, appointed July 2018)

Age: 48

Current employment: Technical project manager at Naval Undersea Warfare Center-Keyport

"I enjoy seeing the recognition of students for their achievements. ... Just being able to be a small part of it is amazing."

The district needs a strategic capital plan that addresses all schools, not only the high school, Gattenby said. Cedar Heights Middle School and South Colby Elementary, for example, are well beyond their life spans. "All of the buildings are getting older, and we're just biding our time," he said. "The district needs to ask people what they want and what they will support."

Gattenby said the district's budget issues this spring were "mostly related to enrollment," especially at the high school. Feedback he's gotten doorbelling suggests "the loss of enrollment is related to the facilities and the number of students at each building. The overcrowding was pushing people away." He said student numbers have stabilized and the budget is sound. The district is working to bring students back by partnering with an online academy.

Gattenby lauds South Kitsap's career and technical education program, which helps students graduate "career ready" for a diverse range of jobs. "They have more resources available than I ever had as a student," he said. "Our program is on par with, I think, any nationally recognized program." More could be done to dispell the stigma associated with vocational education, he said. Gattenby says he is an "active voice for our special education students" and an advocate for equity with a special eye out for "those who are most at risk."

Position 2

Name: John Berg

Age: 71

Current employment: Professional parliamentarian (expert on Roberts Rules of Order), retired real estate assessor

Attending school board meetings (he's attended regularly for about two years) and attending his grandchildren's school activities.

If the district runs another capital measure, the board needs to do a better job of listening to the public beforehand, Berg said. In his observation, the board is often dismissive of audience comments. Although the district ran online surveys and forums before placing the 2018 bond and capital levy on the ballot, "there wasn't much discussion (on the board's part) on how they settled on their final decision." "My goal is to have the board run a little more efficiently, a little more transparently," Berg said, as an overall goal. He personally supported the bond for a second high school.

"The way to provide fiscal stability is to fix the state Legislature," Berg said, calling for more predictability in school funding. Every year, there are tweaks to allocations, he said "If (the district) has to rely on the whim of the voters (for local levies) or the whim of the Legislature, it's hard to do any long-range planning. ... All you can do is try to manage the funds you have in a prudent and responsible manner." The board needs to prioritize funding, he said.

"I think they're trying to be transparent," Berg said. "They're trying to get the information on the website so it's available to the public. I think they just need to move forward with that." On a personal level, Berg has found school staff responsive to family concerns.

Name: Glenn Compton

Age: 47

Current employment: Instruction and classroom tech in the medical assistant program at Olympic College

Q: What's one activity you enjoy doing in South Kitsap Schools?

A: Compton has served since last year on the district's career and technical education advisory committee. She enjoys volunteering for her children's sports and activities. "I was always the go-to mom," she said.

"With that question, I'm still doing a little more research on it. I'm not for it or against it. I need to do more studying."

Kitsap's Navy facilities mean student populations will fluctuate with family deployments. She thinks recent raises given to teachers coupled with enrollment trends mean the budget is "unsustainable." She affirms the importance of teachers, however. Compton wants clarity on the budget. "What I'm looking for is where is all the spending going? We need to find where all the unnecessary spending and waste is and divert it to areas where it's needed," she said. Compton recommends bringing back a citizens' budget advisory committee.

"I am really proud of their CTE (career and technical education) and NJROTC programs," she said. The district should continue funding and enhancing programs like these that have a proven impact on student college and career readiness. The board should help build South Kitsap's reputation while working to make improvements, she said. "I want to be part of a team that helps South Kitsap be even greater. ... I believe in full and total transparency. That means the community must be included whenever we make decisions about our schools and our money."

Position 5

Name: Jeff Daily

Age: 66

Current employment: Retired U.S. Air Force officer and retired special education teacher

Daily enjoys seeing former students out in the community who are successful in their jobs. "It's just so good they are out and productive and doing good things."

Daily in his campaign has shared illustrations of a proposed expansion of South Kitsap High School, with an addition to the main wing, more classrooms in a new wing and a multi-level parking garage. He's not stuck on the idea but thinks the concept should have been given more meaningful discussion before the 2018 bond. Running a bond for a second high school after four recent failures makes no sense, Daily said. As for a capital levy for existing school renovations, he would support future levies "if the priorities are clearly spelled out" and if the district can show the community tangible progress.

Daily touts his background in business and finance, expertise he says the board currently lacks. "I understand where the money comes in and where the money goes out," he said. Daily has criticized administrative salary increases and said the trajectory of teachers' salaries, from state increases and current contracts, will "bankrupt" the district in a matter of years. He advocates paring away spending that doesn't have a proven impact on student achievement. Daily is endorsed by the group, Citizen Supporting South Kitsap Schools, that expresses similar positions on the district's budget.

Q: What are South Kitsap schools doing right and how would you build on that success?

A: Daily's top priority is academic excellence. All other decisions should stem from this focus, he said. Decisions should be data-driven not based on "feel-good" educational trends, Daily says. "Changing leadership (on the board) will produce excellence in teaching and learning to attract and retain students." Daily thinks the new superintendent Tim Winter is "superb." He strongly supports the district's early childhood programs. "I like any program that is for our young learners," he said. "That should be a budget priority."

Name: Greg Wall (incumbent, first elected 2011)

Age: 69

Current employment: Longtime South Kitsap attorney

"I enjoy much about our schools and students, but my favorites are high school graduations and open houses at the elementary and middle schools at the beginning of the year."

"The answer is yes. Our needs have not changed to any degree in the last four years," Wall said. "While we did pass a capital levy, much work needs to be done to upgrade our school facilities. I support an additional capital levy for transportation and technology. I also support a bond issue. We need a second high school." Wall said the board will likely explore the possibility of a 6-12 school (like Klahowya Secondary in Central Kitsap School District) to replace Cedar Heights Middle School and add capacity in grades 9 through 12. For any future bond, the district now has money in its capital budget to do a more detailed feasibility study early on, Wall said.

The district is fiscally stable, Wall said, citing a recent state audit. "I want to reassure people things are pretty good financially," he said. Enrollment was only partly to blame for this spring's budget issues, he said. There were other factors at play, which the district was able to address while maintaining a 5% minimum fund balance. "To my opponent, things are going to hell in a handbasket. Things are actually going pretty good," he said.

"South Kitsap School District is constantly improving its educational offerings, both in our basic education classes and in career and technical education." Wall cites the high school's 86.1% graduation rate in 2017-18, which surpassed the state's average of 80.9%. The rate in 2019 was above 89%, Wall said. The district is making curriculum upgrades to improve and align its academic programs. South Kitsap should retain its wide range of extracurricular and specialty programs to keep students with diverse interests engaged, Wall said. "These things are the key to attracting kids and keeping them in the district."

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