A+ Schools launches 'Vote School Board First!' 2021 campaign

By Ashlee Green

A virtual press conference was held on Feb. 16 to announce the kickoff of the 2021 “Vote School Board First!” campaign. The goals of the campaign are to keep voters informed about the important role that school board members play, spotlight this year’s candidates, and encourage participation in the upcoming primary election, which takes place on Tuesday, May 18.

Graham Mulqueen, deputy director of policy at A+ Schools, introduced the meeting and James Fogarty, executive director, first addressed attendees by explaining the school board’s general operating budget.

“One of the things that I like to put out every year, especially when we talk about what it means to have a school board that is engaged and active in our work, is the fact that the school board has a general operating budget that’s nearly $100 million dollars greater than the City of Pittsburgh’s,” Fogarty said.

Included in the budget, Fogarty explained, is feeding students, transporting them to public, private and charter schools, and school nursing staff. School board members, he said, must be “good stewards” for the budget money to be spent well.

“School board is a very important job. It’s a voluntary job. So what we’re asking folks today is if you think you can make a difference for our children in our region, there is no greater way to do that then by running for school board,” Fogarty said.

Coalition members Esther Bush, CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh; Rosamaria Cristello, executive director of the Latino Community Center; and Jenna Baron, executive director of ARYSE were present at the Feb. 16 press conference.

In her presentation, Bush referenced the City of Pittsburgh’s 2019 Gender Equity Commission report called “Pittsburgh’s Inequality Across Gender and Race.”

“Black boys and girls in public high school who passed at least one AP test? Zero. Zero. None of them passed an AP test. That should scare you no matter what race you are or if your children are grown or not even in public school,” she said. “It impacts who we are as a city, as a community, as a city that’s trying to move from A to B.” A school board member, Bush explained, can be an “equalizer.”

“If you are interested in ending systemic racism in Pittsburgh, you can start by electing compassionate, concerned, informed members of the Pittsburgh School Board,” she said.

Cristello spoke next, emphasizing that

students who identify as Latinx make up a growing population in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS).

“We need school board members that understand that things are changing, that understand that not all children are the same, and that can speak to that and advocate for every single child in our district.”

She continued:

“...Support for kids that have gone through traumatic events, that needs to be part of what we’re talking about in schools. Children are not going to be able to sit there and listen to what’s being taught if we’re not addressing the whole child.”

Baron reiterated Cristello’s points and stressed the need for “better investments for English learners” throughout PPS. She said that while there are teachers and administrators who, on an individual level, go “above and beyond each and every day to make the most out of what they have,” it’s still important for collective investments to “reflect the number of families who are entrusting the district with their child’s education.”

Fogarty wrapped up by discussing the structural and financial issues with the city’s public education system.

“The district’s facing a $39 million deficit, there was a proposal for school closures just a couple weeks ago, so there’s a lot of questions about the future,” he said. “Those questions will be answered by this board and those … who are chosen this spring in the primary and then in the fall in the general election.”

Find out more about this year’s Vote School Board First! campaign, including information about candidates, instructions on voter registration and voting by mail, and how to find out which school board district you live in, at voteschoolboardfirst.com.

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