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AUHSD board candidates offer their insights about education

By John T. Miller



Nancy Kendzierski Paul Derksen Christopher Severson Bob Hockett Photos provided

Incumbents Nancy Kendzierski and Bob Hockett , along with candidates Paul Derksen, Christopher Severson are vying for three open seats on the Acalanes Union High School District board. Lamorinda Weekly reached out to the candidates to answer questions about educational priorities, milestones and challenges faced by Lamorinda high schools. The following are the questions and answers.

LW: What are your top three priorities (from Voter's Edge California website):

Kendzierski: Support the District's strong academic focus and performance. Maintain fiscal stability. Work closely with parents and the community to continue and enhance their invaluable support.

Derksen: Maintain and enhance academic excellence for all students at all schools. Preserve and promote fiscal stability and responsibility. Create opportunities to recruit and retain qualified teachers and

staff.

Severson: Special attention to student wellness. Maintain superior public education. Efficient deployment of scarce resources.

Hockett: Support programs which meet the needs of each and every one of our students. Support aggressive recruitment of top-notch teachers in the face of the growing teacher shortage. Promote fiscal responsibility.

LW: What contributions to education are you most proud of?

Kendzierski: I am proud of our efforts to continuously explore ways to improve the educational experience for AUHSD students, including new initiatives like block schedules, academy periods, wellness centers, new science standards and new graduation requirements. Excellence isn't maintained by standing still. Contributions like these are the result of a team effort over time and I'm very proud to be part of a board, administration, staff and community that work together for the students' welfare.

Derksen: As an educational advocate, volunteer, and proud member of our community, I am committed to keeping our schools exceptional. Whether I volunteered in a classroom, ran a school auction, kept the books, or lead the organization, every thing we do to maintain and enhance the education of our students, is a win. I think we can't educate a whole child without the engagement of parents and communities. I've been fortunate to contribute in many ways and want to take it up to the next level by running for the AUHSD governing board.

Severson: I was elected to the OUSD board during a critical time and served for four years as board member as well as president. We faced financial and school climate challenges and the district was on much better footing compared to when I started in 2010.

Hockett: I am proud of my 33 years of high school teaching. As a student at Acalanes, I was fortunate to have many enthusiastic teachers with a deep passion for teaching and student learning, and great respect for, and rapport with, students. I tried to be that type of teacher. Having a positive impact and influence on my students for 33 years is a source of pride and humility.

LW: What are your qualifications?

Kendzierski: I have been an active parent and community volunteer since moving here in 1995, including 12 years on the executive boards of PTAs and as a Moraga Education Foundation director since 2005. As a volunteer school legislative representative, I gained significant knowledge of education legislation and school funding and worked with all the schools and partner districts in the AUHSD attendance area.

I have five years of experience on the AUHSD board. My areas of focus have been finance and legislation, plus more recently equity and wellness/mental health. My experience as a high-tech research manager helps me understand decision-making and fiduciary responsibilities and provide leadership on financial issues. I have worked with stakeholders through task forces, community meetings, educational forums, and individual conversations to encourage collaboration and communication among all parties.

Derksen: For nearly 15 years I have volunteered in public schools in a wide variety of leadership positions including treasurer, president, auction chair, and education foundation director. Currently, I am PTA president for Las Trampas Creek Council of PTAs, working with all PTA schools in the AUHSD attendance area. Our legislative efforts reach out to all public schools in the area. I believe in the value of a quality public education. I want to work with teachers, parents and the community to ensure AUHSD students receive the outstanding education they deserve.

Severson: I understand the role and have already succeeded as a school board member. I have a working relationship with our superintendent and have collaborative contacts across the communities served by the AUHSD board as shown by broad endorsement support.

Hockett: My experience as a classroom teacher for 33 years, as well as the knowledge obtained as an

AUHSD board member for the past four years.

LW: What major difficulty faces the AUHSD and how do you propose to remedy it?

Kendzierski: As part of attending a high-performing district, AUHSD students also face issues of high expectations, pressure and stress, and are not immune to problems with depression, suicide ideation, bullying, alcohol/drug use, etc. Starting this year, each school has a Wellness Center where students can drop in and receive many different kinds of coordinated support to eventually help reconnect them back to learning.

Derksen: Given the state of school funding in California, challenges always face our public schools. Staying focused on fiscal responsibility and stability continue to be key. Funding of the district's pension liabilities requires continued monitoring. Since one of the board members not continuing brought financial experience to the table, I'm hoping my financial experience can fill that gap. Although our district is a destination for teachers and staff, the potential teacher shortage forces us to find smart ways to recruit and retain qualified teachers and staff.

Severson: Student wellness is a big concern of mine. As a parent of three children currently in the district and as an Emergency Medicine Physician, I have many insights into how we can help our students successfully navigate the high school years. We need strong working partnerships between students, parents, educators and community organizations for solutions and to help ensure meaningful change.

Hockett: There are many, but I will focus on the very significant teacher shortage, which has already reached crisis proportion in many California school districts. Presently, AUHSD has been only slightly impacted because our highly motivated students, along with extremely supportive parents and community, have made our district highly desirable to teach in. As our many veteran teachers retire, coupled with the high cost of living in the Bay Area, we will have to grapple with that shortage. We need to actively recruit teachers, strive to keep salaries and benefits among the best, and maintain good conditions for teaching.

LW: What is your opinion about school start times and schedules?

Kendzierski: The research on school start times is clear and we need to accommodate it. Block scheduling has been a step in the right direction, including a later start time on a majority of school days, longer periods to provide time for in-class collaboration and work on projects, and wider spacing of classes through the week that can mean homework for fewer classes on any given night. There is still more to be done and it's important to work with our partner districts, families and communities in this ongoing process.

Derksen: I believe the current school board did due diligence getting input from all stakeholders and made a decision they believe is in the best interest of our students. Since its implementation starts next school year, I would be honored to be part of the process to implement and monitor the progress.

Severson: I want to help further any efforts between students, parents and staff that will contribute to student success and wellness. I think this conversation (start times and schedules) is ongoing and productive so far.

Hockett: I believe an 8:30 starting time is desirable and would probably be healthier for our students. Presently we start school at 8:35 three days a week, and at 8 a.m. two days a week. To start the other two days later might result in some stakeholder opposition due to the possible negative impact of pushing back the end of the school day by some 30 minutes those two days. But I believe we should have that discussion.

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