

CABINET REPORT

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Art ed advocates put candidates on the spot

by Kimberly Beltran



(Calif.) If your district has a school board race on the ballot this year and you want to know where the candidates stand on promoting arts curriculum in education, there's an online tool that can help you out – sort of.

Of the 321 contenders – all invited to participate in the California Alliance for Arts Education's [Candidate Survey Project](#) – 101 responded, including the two men seeking the state's top education post.

"The surveys provide valuable information for voters who are interested in restoring arts, music, theater and dance to local schools," Joe Landon, executive director of the Alliance, said in a statement. "Many people don't realize that arts education is required by our state education code, but has been underfunded in recent years due to California's budget crisis."

Even prior to the 2007 recession, shifting political forces and societal values over the past several decades had also contributed to a steady decline of arts programs in public schools.

But with the state's recent passage of a new education funding system – the Local Control Funding Formula – school trustees have greater authority in setting local policy and making spending decisions for how their districts will meet eight statewide academic priorities. One of them mandates a broad course of study that includes visual and performing arts, which have been linked to increased student engagement in school, higher test scores and a reduction in truancy and dropout rates.

The survey, broken down by school district, posed three questions to trustee candidates, including the most pointed one: If elected, how will you promote the role of arts education in a complete education for students?

The answers are as varied as the candidates, with most saying that they would, in some way, foster support for – or continue to build on existing – arts education programs in their districts. However, not all offered specific plans for how they would do so.

A few hinted at financial hurdles schools still face in paying for not only the core educational needs of their students – such as implementation of new Common Core State Standards, estimated to be in the billions of dollars – but also the critical support services that many children need to be successful learners.

“Unfortunately, the state does not fund schools to the extent that gives flexibility to local districts to provide the level of arts education we all wish we could,” wrote Eileen Robinson, who’s seeking re-election as a Chico Unified School District trustee. “The LCFF and LCAP do offer some increased flexibility but with years of cutbacks and restoration of funding coming ever so slowly over the next eight years, hope for major change is very small.”

Some suggested ways in which they would or already have supported art programming in schools, like Helen Foster, a school administrator and former science and music teacher who’s seeking to become the Alameda County schools superintendent.

“I will fight for funding and training for ... STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) across Alameda County by tapping government, public and private sources, with emphasis on student internships, technological support and infrastructure, STEM and STEAM competitions and university mentorships and collaboration.”

Her vision, she said, is “to secure funding and develop networking for K-14, ROP and community college education in Alameda County with STEM and STEAM providers around the Bay Area so our schools provide the very best training and opportunities in the state and nation.”

The survey also asked candidates what meaningful experiences with the arts they had growing up, and what role they think the arts can play in achieving the eight state priorities outlined in the LCFF.

Current Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson said he has called for a “renaissance in arts education” and touted his department’s work in supporting non-profit arts organizations in producing resources districts can use to explain how arts education can be highlighted during the Local Control and Accountability Plan process.

“The arts can be a key component of strategies to keep students in school, close the achievement gap, and give our students the skills and experiences they need to live a great life,” he said.

Torlakson’s opponent, Marshall Tuck, said fundamental change in the way schools are run is needed to “effectively engage with local communities and provide every student with the arts education they deserve.”

The Candidate Survey Project is spearheaded by local community members associated with the Alliance’s Local Advocacy Network, with chapters in more than 30 California communities. These groups work to forge relationships with local school boards, building community support and offering alternatives to cutting arts and music programs.

Participating in the survey, said Alliance spokeswoman Sibyl O’Malley, gives supportive candidates a platform to demonstrate their understanding of and commitment to arts education.

“For other candidates, it may make them aware for the first time that there is active support for the arts in their districts or that arts are, in fact, a required subject,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to educate candidates, and even members of the public who read the surveys.”