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PRESENTS

CITIZENS' AGENDA

ASHLAND CITY SCHOOLS



**BETTER
COMMUNICATION**

**WEIGHTED
GRADES**

**WAGES FOR
SUBSTITUTES AND
DRIVERS**

LIFE SKILLS



Dear Ashland City Schools board of education,

This fall, Ashland Source launched something new for our readers and community dubbed Talk the Vote. Our parent company, Richland Source, tried it out for the first time in 2019. It was a resounding success, having received international attention and leading to lively mayoral debates in Mansfield.

The outcome in Ashland was a more informed citizenry and an increase in voter turnout.

Why was it successful? We believe it's because it refocused conversations during local elections on the voters.

But when we created Talk the Vote, we knew the most important outcome was the Citizen's Agenda, which is what this is. It's a document that keeps the conversation going. It is built entirely upon what Ashland residents said they wanted to see happen in their school district.

On Oct. 13 and 14, we hosted our very first Talk the Vote at Uniontown Brewing Co. The first night was dedicated to concerns surrounding Ashland city council. The second night brought residents concerned about the Ashland City Schools board of education election. More than 40 people came to these events combined.

During Talk the Vote, I led an informal conversation around the issues they wanted their local candidates to know matter to them.

Their responses have been compiled into this document. You will see unattributed quotes in this document. This is on purpose. We told everyone their names wouldn't appear in stories or in this document. We wanted them to feel free to express concerns freely.

Another thing. You won't see school board members' and candidates' names. They were invited to attend Talk the Vote but they were asked to stay quiet. This was a chance for residents to speak their minds and a chance for candidates to listen. We're grateful to report the candidates and elected officials who chose to attend followed our rule.

This document shows collaboration — between journalists, elected officials and their communities — can be incredibly powerful when done intentionally and with an open mind.

So, elected officials, on behalf of those residents who showed up to our inaugural Talk the Vote event, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue laying plans for your time in office.

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THE CITIZENS' AGENDA

1: BETTER COMMUNICATION

This might be a preaching-to-the-choir moment, but it could also just be a good reminder.

“Board members are critical as to communication that goes on in the school community.”

Residents had a lot to say about communication. Some were concerned that board members just weren't listening, or that the board wasn't listening to all sides of an issue, or that when the board acknowledged issues, they did so in a condescending way.

But it wasn't all criticism. There were a number of people who had ideas about how to improve upon this.

One person said she would feel more comfortable sitting down in person to talk about certain issues instead of standing up behind a podium during meetings.

This point prompted a man to interject with this thought:

“Probably the worst time to talk to a school board member is during a meeting. For my money's worth, the best way to approach a board member is to do it individually, and do it behind the scenes.”



One man said the board could encourage community members to come sit in classes, similar to the way the Ashland County-West Holmes Career Center.

“If we had the ability to encourage teachers to call five parents before a school board meeting,” that could work to get more people at a meeting.



COMMUNICATION (CONTINUED -->)

But the person with the original point said she's also tried emailing board members with no responses.

"If they're not communicating with you, they need to be replaced," the man responded.

The same man had an idea to help, though: form board advisory committees that could laser in on issues and topics specific to the district.

Someone else had another idea that might lead to better communication between board members and constituents. He said the board could encourage community members to come sit in classes, similar to the way the Ashland County-West Holmes Career Center.

"If we had the ability to encourage teachers to call five parents before a school board meeting," that could work to get more people at a meeting.

2. WEIGHTED GRADES

A handful of residents at the Talk the Vote event brought up, passionately, their desire for Ashland schools to have a weighted grading system.

"It's ridiculous that we have 14 valedictorians every year, when in sports you have one MVP," said one citizen.

Another, who is a retired teacher, said: "I think it's shameful."

Other residents expressed sympathy to the complexity of the varying grading systems, but still thought weighted grades should be considered.

"Sometimes children are trying to go for a certain goal are penalized. It helps to have the extra letters after your diploma, and we all know that. Because some kids take a full load and they don't get all A's, it can be difficult. We have to figure out ways to recognize our students, not just in one way. That makes it easier for teacher to develop their curriculum so it's more fair. Weighted grades are not easy. I have a friend, their child went to Dartmouth and one of their AP classes counted."

3. INCREASE WAGES FOR SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS AND DRIVERS

There seems to be a lot of discussion surrounding wages these days. Supply chain shortages, a labor work force shortage, inflation, a pandemic, etc. etc. are all topics that have contributed to this debate.

Is the district paying competitive wages? This was the main question during this discussion, but one person raised the philosophical chicken and the egg dilemma.

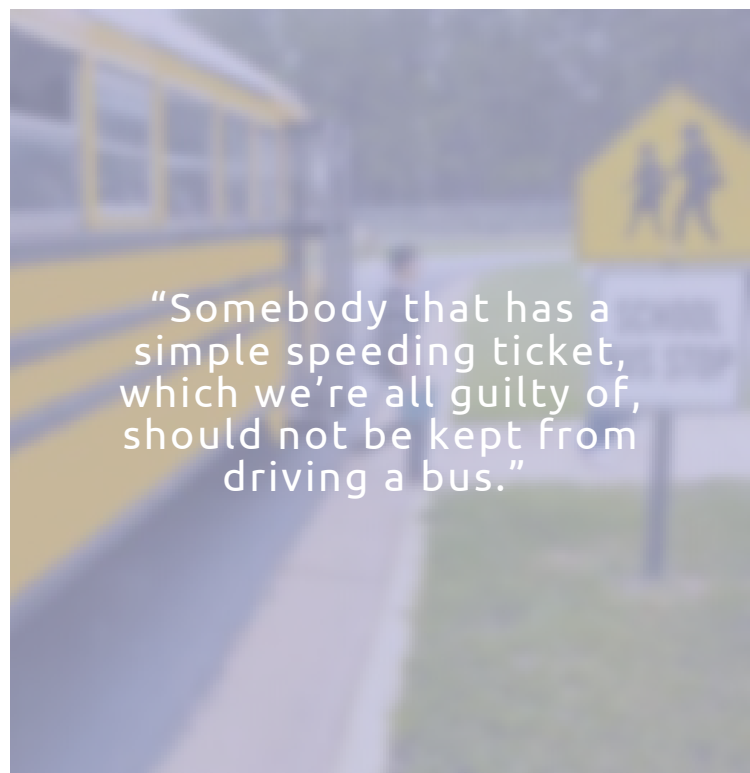
“Wages are important, but (substitutes) quickly find out where the highest wage is being paid and everyone goes to the highest district. The real problem is the workforce available,” said one person.

So, is the problem low wages? Or is the problem a lack of workers? Maybe it’s both.

State government faced this workforce issue back in January 2021, by waiving the requirement for substitute teachers to have a bachelor’s degree. Some local districts have since followed suit.

Other districts, like Lexington School District, have raised the daily rate for subs recently.

One person said maybe the district should relax some rules that hinder people from earning a CDL. “Somebody that has a simple speeding ticket, which we’re all guilty of, should not be kept from driving a bus.”



WAGES

(CONTINUED -->)

Another person quickly pointed out: “I would say relaxing the standards is the last thing you want to do. I work with CDL drivers every day and we have some who need to be taken off the roads. Plus, the first time something happens with those kids, they’re going to be facing a major lawsuit.”

The issue, like many these days, is complex. There is no one solution, many agreed. But there definitely seemed to be a desire from the residents that night for outside-the-box thinking.

4. LIFE SKILLS

As a segue related to the workforce development line of thinking, one person suggested the need for more focus from the school district on life skill training and curricula — “in addition to the career center.”

“Not everybody is destined for college. We need to go back to teaching kids that college isn’t the only answer ... nobody knows how to sew a button or write a check or pay their taxes.”

One resident said he and his wife lived in Germany for close to a decade, while raising kids there for a time. He noted the country’s system of apprenticeship and training.

“Some people come out of high school ready to enter the workforce in areas that are so needed in our culture, like plumbers and electricians.”

Some residents then brought up the idea of reaching out to local business owners to create possible apprenticeship programs.

Maybe, one resident thought, was that students just have no knowledge of jobs and careers that are out there.

“I’ve often thought about a night program where the school shows them the zillions of jobs that are out there, and show these kids something bigger ... There are so many things they need to be exposed to.”

Another resident thought the district could modernize its curriculum a bit, offering more coding classes to more students and updating older curriculum (like horticulture).



THE TAKEAWAY

Your constituents are passionate. They care about the quality of their children's education. Some may know more about the mechanics of your and the district's work, and they all have ideas that could strengthen that central mission: to provide the best education.

With that in mind, please refer to the following questions as you continue your service on the board of education:

1. Is there an appetite from school board members to implement a more informal meeting with constituents or to think of ways to get more people involved in regular board meetings? (Remember one resident's idea of getting teachers to reach out to parents before meetings.)
2. Is there a way to improve upon the district's grading system that addresses concerns of people who think the current system is inadequate in certain areas?
3. Is the district paying competitive wages to its substitute teachers and bus drivers? If not, what could lead to solutions in this area?
4. How can Ashland incorporate apprenticeship, training and other mentor-type programs to address a perceived lack in life skills at graduation?
5. What can the district do to update its curriculum to include more "modernized" education opportunities?

And a bonus question/consideration:

We ran out of time to really unpack this, but one resident said the school district has done a lot to upgrade facilities — can we see a long-term plan for facilities? Does something like this exist?