

Chanda Baker Smith: A fresh voice in education

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Minneapolis mother, educator seeks at-large seat on MPS

The race for Minneapolis Board of Education heats up in the wake of numerous changes, not only in elected members, but in the overall structure of the board itself. This November, Minneapolis residents will elect five members to the board of Education and four in 2012.

Due to a referendum in 2008 enacted by voters, election districts will be based on existing districts for the Minneapolis Parks & Recreation Board eventually increasing the size of the board from seven to nine members by 2013.

With the announcements from the current board members, including Tom Madden, Chris Steward and Pam Costain, that they will not be seeking re-election, there's a flurry of interest in the seats up for grabs, with six candidates vying for the two At-large seats alone.

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Chanda Smith Baker is one of them.

We were able to catch up with Chanda to get her perspective on the race and why she's running.

INSIGHT: Chanda why are you running?

CSB: I'm running because I realize it's possible for schools in low income and urban areas to achieve high results in academic achievement. With the right leadership, partnership and community involvement, it's possible to create a culture of success and learning within our schools and for our children.

As a mother of five school aged children, my husband and I struggled in our choice of schools for our children. This struggle led me to become more active in education over 10 years ago. I've always urged mothers to use their voices to advocate for their children. This year, they urged me to use mine!

I interact on a daily basis with children and programs that are successful through my role at Pillsbury United Communities. I've been a part of start up schools and have been involved with initiatives to create more choices, more options for parents and students. The goal is to significantly increase academic achievement and I am confident I can work with the MPS school board to achieve that.

INSIGHT: What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing MPS?

CSB: We need to bridge the achievement gap. In 2009, only 34% of the children excelled in reading, a mere 8% in math. The Board also needs to reflect the diversity of the community it serves, with over 70% of MPS children being of color, the board should explore options and solutions that reflect the unique needs of ALL children. If all children, although having various needs, educational and behavioral styles, are held to the same standard, we have to ask ourselves if this model is working? What other options are available to parents and their children. Are we providing all the tools and resources to ensure success?

There are a lot of empty schools, North High School, my alma mater is scheduled to close by 2012. While low academic achievement is cited for these decisions we have to ask ourselves was this our only course of action? What else could be done?

INSIGHT: What is your view on Charter Schools?

CSB: Each child, family and situation is different. Charter schools can be a viable option for parents who understand the unique needs of their children. There is a misconception that charters are all private or take away from funding or the needs of other students etc. They do not draw or take away from funding for existing public schools. While some are private, many are public and under district jurisdiction.

We are a choice and consumer driven society, it's part of our cultural fabric; only, it's just now happening in education. Charters aren't new they've been around for over 20 years, they're just now becoming a popular choice for parents who aren't satisfied with traditional options. We shouldn't blame parents for wanting to explore the best options for their kids. We have to understand what parents are looking for and create schools and the learning environment they're looking for. There are currently three charters under MPS. As an At-Large member of the board, I would leverage my experience and knowledge of charter schools in my role with the MPS school board.

INSIGHT: What do you hope to accomplish with MPS?

CSB: We have to create a level of transparency and partnership with the community, including

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parents, community leaders and community organizations. The children have also been absent in the conversation. How do we meet them where they're at? How do we help them get what they need to be successful?

We also have to regain improvements in academic performance. We have to think outside the box and explore other options. The mistake people often make is staying away from conversations they don't like....but you have to be at the table. It doesn't mean agreement, it just means you seized the opportunity to be informed about the decisions being made that impact you and your community. But you must show up!

People can't be afraid of policy...you have to lead from where you are.

I would also work for organizational effectiveness. Making sure systems are aligned to measure, report and create multiple measures of success.

INSIGHT: How has working the campaign affected your family?

CSB: When I first considered running I met with my family to gain their input. They were all 100% supportive of me. As a mother with five children, it was important for my husband and me to maintain a level of balance in our household given all the excitement of the campaign. But they are all whole-heartedly involved! My children-and their friends- help with the campaign, stuffing envelopes, etc. It's definitely been an exciting time for us.

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With the headquarter move, a new superintendent and the growing needs of our communities and children, it's imperative that our school board not only reflects the diversity of our community, but stays current on the evolving needs of the children. Our most pressing question is how do we keep our educational system from becoming obsolete?

Chanda's husband, Roland Baker, Jr., has served over 20 years in the airline industry working for Northwest Airlines, now Delta Airlines. He's also a member of the union. The couple have six children: Tamara, 24, Dominique, 17, Malik 14, Elon, 11, Jayland 7 and Ryland, 5. Chanda is especially proud of daughter, Tamara, a Patrick Henry graduate, who will be attending Clark University for her MBA.

Chanda is a founding member of the Hope Collaborative, an initiative that brings inspirational educators that have demonstrated success with low income students of color. She is currently the Chief Learning Officer with Pillsbury United Communities serving as the VP of Strategic Partners and Educational Strategies, Government and Community Relations. She's also heavily involved in many community service programs

"Chanda is well qualified to help guide our district during a very challenging time in Minneapolis Public Schools. As a Minneapolis North Community High School graduate, a parent of public school children, a non-profit executive who's leading a charter school in partnership with MPS, she provides the balance and experience we need right now on the board," said campaign manager, Brett Buckner.

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The DFL Convention is May 22 at Patrick Henry High School. Chanda is seeking the DFL endorsement and has secured prominent endorsements from State Rep. Jeff Hayden and former Commissioner of Minneapolis Parks & Recreation Board, Mary Merrill Anderson among many others.

Primary Election Day is August 10th with General Election November 2nd

“I just hope voters will see me for the contributions I have made and will continue to make. I hope they won’t let ethnicity and where they live limit their thinking of what they feel we can contribute as a board. Parenting and leadership transcend race and neighborhood.....it’s not a geographical issue....it’s about the future of our children,” said Baker.