



2023 La Crosse County Democrats Spring Local Election Voter Guide

This voter guide is a service of the La Crosse County Democratic Party. All candidates for all elections in the county, regardless of ideology, were invited to participate. Inclusion in this guide does not imply the LCDP endorses the candidates. Answers to questions have not been edited.

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Holmen School Board

Name: Khadijah Islam

Current Employment: Coulee Connections LLC

Contact information for your campaign: khadijah.a.islam@gmail.com

What inspired you to run for school board?

I was inspired to run for school board because service to the community is one of my values. I am a proud Holmen graduate and I feel passionate about maintaining a high level of excellence for the Holmen School District.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?

My experience as a former Holmen student has prepared me to advocate for and protect educational opportunities for all students. My work as a mental health professional will help me to make sure that supporting our staff and our students is a priority in school board decisions.

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?

I envision a district that is able to prepare all of its students for the next steps in their professional and personal lives. To me, this means making sure that students are given opportunities in school that prepare them for the job market or college opportunities when they graduate. I would also like to see these educational opportunities align with the needs of the workforce in the Holmen and surrounding areas.

As a school board member, what would be some of your spending priorities be?

I believe that spending should be prioritized for support to currently underfunded programs and initiatives. This may look like better compensation for educators. It may also look like increasing budgets for special education and the arts. I would also like to see spending go towards strengthening apprenticeship and career and technical education (CTE).

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

I believe any major community organization, including school districts, should have a Climate Action Plan. The climate crisis needs to be approached with community based efforts. School districts can be a major influence on their communities when it comes to making changes towards a sustainable future.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

I believe that Democratic and Progressive voters should support me because I am a supporter of public education. As a prospective school board member, I will make it my priority that the focus of the school board is maintaining a high level of excellence in public education.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?

This is my first time running and I am very excited about this opportunity. I bring with me strong leadership capacity, experience working in teams, and a willingness to communicate my opinion even if it is not the majority opinion.

Name: Maggie Smith

Current Employment: Adolescent Health Coordinator for WI Department of Health Services

Contact information for your campaign: friendsofmaggiesmith@gmail.com

What inspired you to run for school board?*

I am running to keep my seat on the Holmen School Board because I care deeply for the education and well-being of Holmen's young people (all of them). Additionally, I have personally seen the impact and importance of local district policy on students through my professional roles, and want to use my skills to ensure our local policies are inclusive and thorough.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?*

I am currently a Board member for the School District of Holmen and serve on both the Personnel and Governance Committee and the Student Achievement and Learning Committee. Professionally, I have over thirteen years of experience working with school districts in the Coulee Region and throughout Wisconsin to support healthy environments, systems, and policies. In my current professional role as Adolescent Health Coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, I direct the funding and implementation of programs statewide that support the well-being of Wisconsin's young people including social-emotional learning, anti-bullying initiatives, suicide prevention, and sexual health promotion. My background and education is in public health, and I'm a Masters Certified Health Education Specialist. I have experience managing large budgets, county and state level contracting requirements, and am an experienced grant writer. Additionally, I have past experience on a school board and was the president of a local non-profit board of directors in my former community. I'm also a mom of three Holmen students and am grateful to live in such a wonderful, involved community!

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?*

The School District of Holmen's current vision is "Belong. Serve. Succeed." with a mission to "Prepare students for tomorrow through an engaging and inclusive educational community today." and I am very much aligned with the current mission and vision. Schools play a vital role in creating healthy, vibrant communities and the District's core values of empowerment, equity, excellence, integrity and safety also align with my own values. Disparities exist, and I support doing everything we can to overcome them. Every student deserves to belong in school, and feel safe and supported as they learn and grow. I also believe that we need to value and listen to the input of our youth, and help them grow as they are the next generation of leaders. I am also passionate about clear communication and transparency in government.

As a school board member, what would some of your spending priorities be?

Determining spending priorities is, in my opinion, one of the toughest parts of the job. We need safe spaces that support today's learning. We need to responsibly handle the needs of today while carefully planning for the needs of the future. And we must care for the caregivers - without the wonderful staff in our schools we cannot achieve our mission. In Wisconsin, where public education is underfunded, this is challenging. My spending priorities include finding solutions to support and retain our amazing staff, create safe learning environments, and support the needs of our students. Another priority for me (and hopefully for all of us) is also to engage our legislators and ask for increased state and federal funding for public education.

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

I would love to see this happen, especially if done in conjunction with students. Frankly, all of us should have Climate Action Plans and be responsible stewards of our resources. Climate change has and will impact all of us in a multitude of ways.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

I think voters should support me because I have relevant experience, a passion for supporting youth, and the ability to speak up when needed. I make data-driven decisions and am willing to listen to any and all community member concerns. I'm also not afraid to admit when I don't know the answer, and to know when I need to pursue additional learning about a topic, and I believe that's a skill any leader should have.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?

Thank you for your consideration! Reach out to friendsofmaggiesmith@gmail.com with questions or follow on Facebook at facebook.com/maggiesmithforholmenschoolboard

La Crosse City Council

Name: Tamra Dickinson

Office you are running for: LaCrosse City Council District 1

Contact information for your campaign: d_tamra.mcm19@yahoo.com

Current Employment: Retired

Why do you want to run for City Council?*

I have been very active in Logan Northside Neighborhood Association as its Secretary since 2018. After hearing the needs expressed by the residents in the neighborhood regarding the school district referendum of 2022 I felt it was important to increase my involvement and run for City Council District 1.

What is your vision for your city and how would your work as a council member move the city towards that vision?*

I have a passion for gardening and coordinate a number of gardens on the Northside of LaCrosse. We haven't had a grocery store on the Northside since 2020. Working on City Council I hope to further my interest in combatting hunger along with the Climate Action plan recently approved by the council.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the city council?*

I have a number of years experience in leadership positions with the Neighborhood association and my church. I have time to learn and listen to the constituents in my district since my retirement in 2021.

What would be your top policy priority if elected to the City Council?*

I will need to spend time learning the procedures as a new city council member. I want to continue meeting my constituents and advocating for their interests and concerns.

What changes, if any, would you like to see in the city's budget and in how funds are allocated?*

I don't have enough information yet to answer this questions completely. I have a strong interest in the Climate action plan, revitalization of our neighborhoods, and safety in our neighborhoods.

How can the city council help to improve housing and security for its residents?*

I believe continued work in mental health services, affordable housing and revitalization of neighborhoods would help attract and keep our community strong and secure.

Have you read the recently passed La Crosse City Climate Action Plan? Do you support its implementation?

Yes, I am very supportive of the Climate Action Plan.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

I believe my interests and values align with the Democratic voters.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?

I am very excited to invest my time and energy in this position.

La Crosse School Board

Name: Kathi Blanchard

Current Employment: Self employed salon owner/stylist

Contact information for your campaign: kathiblanchard@gmail.com

What inspired you to run for school board?*

I'm a parent with students in the school district and a tax payer. I feel that people like me are affected by decisions made by the board should have more of a voice in those decisions.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?*

As a parent volunteer at my sons elementary school for the last 10 years through custom and PTO, and current district wide parents representative for Northside elementary I see first hand what the teachers and staff face each day. Also as a small business owner I understand budgets and moving things around too make it work fiscally and on time.

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?*

More transparency from the board to the taxpayers, staff, families and students. We work for them not ourselves. Making getting a response to questions from more than 1 or 2 assigned people much easier and faster.

As a school board member, what would some of your spending priorities be?

Student and staff safety, repairing immediate needs, staying current with technology.

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

If you mean climate like temperature and weather.... Yes we only have one earth. If you mean climate as in how people are treated in an atmosphere or vibe.... Yes, everyone should feel safe and welcome.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

Because I feel that I could be a good voice for those who feel silenced due to lack of continued education or financial back ground. I feel strongly that my running for this position is not for my personal gain but to bring more fairness to everyone it affects.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?*

That I'm really just a mom, wife, and small business owner who wants every child to succeed, and to show our staff and students that they are worth my time to stand up for them. Thank you

What was your reaction to the recent La Crosse school referendum? What do you think could have been done differently?

Honestly I'm glad it failed, it was way too much money, bad location for most of the families in lacrosse. Better transparency from the school board. Better plans in place, no we will figure it out as it comes. Better more centrally located. Really making it easier to understand the questions and truthful answers from the superintendent

Name: Jeff Jackson

Current Employment: Projects Director at Rexel USA

Contact information for your campaign: jjacksonschoolboard@gmail.com

What inspired you to run for school board?*

First, my three kids who are in the District and how the choices over the next few years will affect their educational experience. Second, I felt like there would be a few candidates who would be running only based solely on their feelings for last year's referendum and the consolidation issue, but not looking at the long term health of the District. Lastly, I want to make sure the teachers and staff are supported by the District.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?*

I currently work for a publicly traded multi national company which focuses on maximizing profitability for their shareholders while building an inclusive work culture. This dynamic puts the field team in the position to build a strong business and culture with less resources. To accomplish this task requires creativity and listening to your team. To me, my work life is a bit like the situation the District is in now. We need to solve a bevy of issues, become better listeners and communicators with all the stakeholders and creatively solve the district challenges while being underfunded by the state.

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?*

My goal is to find creative ways to increase and utilize the District's revenue streams so we can invest in our teachers, staff, programing and facilities. We need to engage the community and consider repurposing District assets, such as Lincoln and Hogan, to potentially be revenue streams. To accomplish these goals we will need to become very good listeners and communicators with the community and staff to ensure that we are meeting the needs of the community but also addressing our excess inventory of buildings. I've talked a lot about revenue and assets, which is very corporate America but my main goals are to provide a safe welcoming environment to all of our students, staff and

community members and to expand support for both our educators and students. I feel that by tackling our financial challenges in a fiscally responsible way and with active citizen engagement, it will allow us to focus on what is the most important, supporting our educators and students.

As a school board member, what would some of your spending priorities be?

Increasing pay for teachers/staff, special education, closing the learning gap, mental health support , facilities/climate plan and life preparation curriculum.

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

Yes, there needs to be a short term plan as well as a long term plan put in place. This should be part of the facilitates planning committee's goals when they are discussing what is needed to provide a great educational environment. Also the District could look at grants, as well as state and federal funding sources to bring climate mitigation technologies, such as green roofs, PV, wind turbines, EV vehicles, HVAC and electrical monitoring into the educational experience. This could be part of the short term plan while we work on solving the long term budget issues.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

I support inclusive education, our teachers and staff, will focus on engaging all stakeholders and want all of our students to have equitable access to the best possible experience while attending our schools.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?

This entire campaign is a bit outside my comfort zone but I'm putting in the work to engage with the community at large before the April election.

What was your reaction to the recent La Crosse school referendum? What do you think could have been done differently?

That the community wants a voice at the table and the plan presented was not well vetted or communicated. It became a bit of a Northside/Southside culture war but at the heart the District went to fast.

Name: Trevor Sprague

Current Employment: Visiting Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition,
UW-Eau Claire

Contact information for your campaign: trevorspraguelaxschools@gmail.com

What inspired you to run for school board?*

Being a model of engaged citizenship for my three kids, being a huge advocate for public education, and wanting to provide as much opportunity and access to quality experiences for every student in the district.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?*

I've worked in higher education for most of career, but have also held roles in volunteer management and non-profit administration here in La Crosse. I grew up in these schools and have experienced La Crosse as a kid and as a parent wanting the best for my kids--this gives me perspective on the community as a whole and how we might work together to create a shared vision for public education in our city. As an academic, I have experience working collaboratively with teams with diverse backgrounds, managing complex long-term projects involving both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and navigating the interests of diverse groups of stakeholders in planning for and delivering a strong educational program. As a scholar of rhetoric and composition, in particular, my work has centered around democratic practices of deliberation, and developing news ways of creating space for communities to talk with one another that overcome barriers to access and traditional exclusions that many segments of our communities have experienced in public life. My education and professional work has all prepared me to listen actively, and to facilitate greater understanding among groups with different sets of interests.

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?*

I believe our district needs to find a way to re-establish a shared sense of what La Crosse residents from every neighborhood want public education to look like for the coming years. A lot of the conversations I hear among community members

have to do with not feeling like they've been heard in regard to recent actions by the board. Developing a strategic plan for addressing the perceived lack of community engagement and revisiting policies that may have limited the board's ability to effectively communicate about its processes is a starting point.

From there, I want there to be no question that the district and the board supports our teachers first and foremost. They are the primary point of interaction with students, and have the greatest potential for positive impact if they feel secure and enabled as professionals. They are the professionals who are best qualified to develop and deliver on high-quality curricula that meet the needs of our changing world. I want teaching in La Crosse to be a viable and attractive vocation so we can draw in great talent who can establish a professional and community life here. Opportunities to grow as educators translate to opportunities for students to learn. At the end of the day, a trained, prepared, and motivated teacher can make up for a lack in some other areas.

The School Board manages its work through policy, so that changes in individual board members don't result in a constantly shifting landscape for students, parents, and teachers to navigate. If elected as a board member, I will work to ensure that our policy prioritizes the health, wellbeing, and learning of students first. Enabling teachers to teach and listening carefully to the classroom needs they tell us we have is an immediate second. Ensuring that the community has ample opportunity to be in conversation with the board, understands the priorities that are guiding major decisions, and has confidence that the board's governance is securing a long-term future of growth and success for our students as the city grows and changes around it.

As a school board member, what would some of your spending priorities be?

We face a great deal of maintenance and upkeep projects that are, quite simply, necessary for the health and safety of students and teachers, and the general operation of our schools. Ensuring that we have the funds to meet those needs without reducing the classroom resources available to teachers or closing down opportunities for students is my first priority.

The second task for whoever is elected is to find ways to resolve the current funding concerns to ensure we don't remain in a precarious position any longer than necessary. While we can hope that Governor Evers' pledge to fully fund public education comes to fruition, it's not a foregone conclusion with the

Wisconsin legislature. Finding ways of consolidating grade levels to bring staff and students together at the same levels could be an important source of efficiency that can prevent unnecessary layoffs. Hopefully this can be done without any further closing of neighborhood schools--I am writing this just after the board's decision to close Lincoln Middle School at the end of August. Updating, greening, and preserving our existing facilities will help ensure the long-term security of the district, as demographics and the environment continue to change around us.

More optimistically, I would like to see the district make investments in more experiential and alternative curricular opportunities for students. There are already some very exciting models of project-based education at La Crosse Polytechnic that I would like to see expanded. Further, I would like the district to explore developing deeper relationships with area industries and artisans and consider early apprenticeship models for interested students. I do not believe in one-size-fits-all education. Although college readiness and making college a truly viable option for every student is an important goal that I fully support, this also has to include supporting students who do not choose to pursue higher education. I see it in my students at Eau Claire, just as I have at every university I've taught at, including here in La Crosse--young people are more and more interested in making things, and I would love for them to find early and quality experiences in a variety of arts, crafts, and skilled practices as part of their public school education, with ready opportunity in the community after they graduate.

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

Absolutely we need a plan that is proactive about the reality of climate change. We tend to feel insulated in the Midwest from the growing concern of climate change, but we're learning more and more about the deep effects that it will have on us. At a very practical level, there is a huge economy in climate-focused work that is not going away any time soon, and only promises to grow with time. A coherent plan for teaching about climate change is part of an Action Plan--and not merely about the importance of conservation or limiting one's carbon footprint. A teaching component that encourages students to be proactive and engaged with climate change as a part of their potential professional lives is not only responsible and good, but will also surely drive innovation.

We have a lot of old buildings in our district, and updating our facilities is not only a health and safety responsibility, but a generational responsibility. Making needed improvements and bringing our brick-and-mortar infrastructure up to

contemporary standards is crucial. If elected, however, I would have to balance proposed building or improvement initiatives against classroom resources as my first priority.

Finally, a plan that acknowledges how the effects of climate change are not always felt equally across our communities is important. Prioritizing those areas or communities most impacted by climate change is a moral commitment we need to make. Making such a commitment goes hand in hand with a commitment to providing equity in resources, access, and opportunities across our district.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

Because I am a true progressive. I will always make decisions based on whether they point in the direction of greater justice, greater access, and greater equity. I am firmly committed to the idea that public education is one of the most important things we do as a society--the health of our communities, our state, and the whole project of democratic self-governance relies on a system of quality public education.

I oppose privatization of education. I have worked for a for-profit school, and while I am proud of the teaching I did and the relationships I was able to form there, it certainly did not serve the larger public good, nor was it "more efficient" than the public schools I've taught in.

I support efforts to build inclusivity, diversity, and equity in public life--education included. As a society we should want people of all backgrounds to be represented in all fields and at all levels. This is because diversity builds perspective, perspective builds understanding, and understanding dispels fear and supports the entire point of bringing everyone in a community together to make decisions that impact us all. A democracy cannot thrive if all of its people cannot participate fully.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?

I am a father of three young kids getting started in La Crosse's public schools. My oldest is a kindergartener at Emerson Elementary, and I hope her younger sister and brother will be able to follow behind her there. We have some real challenges in our district that aren't anyone's fault. We can't change our geography, or the

facts of changing demographics. What we can do is work together as a community to develop a shared vision of what a public education can provide for every kid in every neighborhood. I want to be part of that process, and I am prepared to offer community-informed leadership to our city.

What was your reaction to the recent La Crosse school referendum? What do you think could have been done differently?

I wasn't surprised by the results of the referendum, and although I do think it was an exciting opportunity for the future students, I absolutely understand the value of keeping high schools on both sides of town. High schools anchor communities in important ways, and it's also important to recognize that the North Side in La Crosse hasn't always received the same attention, priority, or benefits as other areas. Although there is a sense of missed opportunity, I feel the community spoke loud and clear on this issue--my hope is that the community understands the costs associated with keeping both schools and shows up just as strongly when the time comes to fund them.

From my perspective, the biggest change I would have made is in communication around the plans and the process. The district did engage in community outreach over a period of about two years. There were multiple surveys--which indicated general support for the idea of school consolidation, as well as listening sessions and the regular meetings of the board. And yet, when the referendum came, the results were almost 2-1 against. What this tells me is that there are deficiencies in the tools the board has for gathering information about what the community wants. This happens for a variety of reasons. Surveys are notoriously difficult to get people to complete, and you're never sure whether the people who do respond are truly representative of your community. Posting public meetings online assumes a few things: that people have access to the internet and are regularly checking for this kind of thing; that people have the time to attend public meetings, or can afford and coordinate childcare, or travel, etc. There are real barriers to participating in these processes that could--and probably did--lead to significant blind spots in the board's work.

But, this is a two-way street. We do also need greater community engagement overall. The board and the district can and should develop new ways of engaging the community, but we also need to foster a broader culture of civic participation in La Crosse. From my perspective, when the board puts up a referendum, there should be no doubt in any member's mind that it will pass because they've done

such a good job reaching into every neighborhood and corner of La Crosse, and they've decided what to ask for based on what the community has told them.

Name: Deb Suchla

Current Employment: Human Services Director (Social Services) - Trempealeau County

Contact information for your campaign: Dsuchla@aol.com

What inspired you to run for school board?*

I want to return transparency and public trust to the School. Following the capital referendum last fall the public has asked for more opportunities to provide input to the schools. The Board is the District's link to the public and needs to improve its connection with the community. Having served on the Board from 2001-2018 I can bring needed experience to the Board.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?*

I have been serving children and vulnerable adults all my career. I served as Executive Director of the Parenting Place for 6 years, and local county Human Services for 18 years. I am a former member of the La Crosse Board of Education and served as Vice Chair and Treasurer for the Board. I am a past President of the La Crosse Area Economic Development Corporation and currently I am a volunteer Core Team member for the La Crosse County Chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace providing beds to children without beds. I have a Bachelors and Masters degree in Business Administration from UW- La Crosse.

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?*

When I was previously on the Board one of our top strategic goals was to be the District of choice in the area. My vision is that students and families choose our district because our students are successful and they have opportunities to grow and learn. They would choose our district because of our great staff and because our district reflects our community's values.

As a school board member, what would some of your spending priorities be?

In this tight labor market we need to attract quality staff. To do so we need to offer competitive compensation. Our students' success depends largely on staff that encourage students and that provide meaningful learning experiences. I would also prioritize resources going to students that are falling behind, students that come from low income homes and students that have special needs. Every student should have an equal opportunity to be as successful as any other student.

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

Unknown - this is not a subject I am knowledgeable in

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

This is a non-partisan position and I am not seeking partisan support.

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?*

This is a non-partisan position and I am not seeking partisan support.

What was your reaction to the recent La Crosse school referendum? What do you think could have been done differently?

While I definitely support investing in our school buildings, that proposal had a very large price tag. I'm concerned about our district's public being able to afford something that costly. We need to find more reasonable ways for our district to cost effectively address our facility needs. Furthermore many in the community did not feel the district was open and transparent on this matter. That's a big reason why I am running for School Board.

Name: Jerry Wacek

Current Employment: Field Technician at Chosen Valley Testing

Contact information for your campaign: Jerrylwacek@gmail.com

What inspired you to run for school board?*

I feel this is an opportunity to be more involved with my kids education, expand parent representation on the board and serve my community.

How has your life and work experience prepared you for the school board?*

Having two children in school, I've been fortunate to see how educators work to support students at all levels. Throughout my professional career I have strived to be someone works well with others. This position is one of many and while members are going to have differences in opinion/philosophy we will need to work as a team.

What is your vision for your district and how would your work as a School Board member move the district towards that vision?*

I believe that quality public education benefits everyone in society, and should be provided in an equitable way that provides opportunity to people of all backgrounds. I will work in collaboration with teachers and staff to create policies that will empower them and provide resources they need to continue providing excellent education to students.

As a school board member, what would some of your spending priorities be?

Priorities would include overdue pay raises for teachers and staff, keeping arts programs

Do you feel the school district needs a Climate Action Plan? Why or why not?

*

Yes. Climate change is something that needs to be tackled on an institutional, not just personal level. As the district is going through infrastructure changes, it is good idea to have goals in mind and guidance on how to achieve them.

Why should Democratic/Progressive voters support you?

I believe that quality public education benefits everyone in society, and should be provided in an equitable way that provides opportunity to people of all backgrounds

What else would you like La Crosse County Democratic Party members to know about your candidacy?*

My family and I have lived in La Crosse for over 7 years and 5 years ago we built our home as part of the La Crosse Promise program. We liked how the program prioritized public education and partnered with schools, neighborhoods and the broader community. We are invested in our neighborhood and consider La Crosse our home.

What was your reaction to the recent La Crosse school referendum? What do you think could have been done differently?

I have heard many different reasons for why people voted against the Fall 22 referendum, but a common theme was a lack communication and community input. People have busy lives and more effort is needed to connect with them earlier in the process.