

2018 Citizens for a Fair Ferndale Candidate Forum

School Board Candidate

Saturday, November 3rd, 2p-4p at the Ferndale Area District Library

Election: Tuesday, November 6, 2018

1. **NAME:** Jim O'Donnell

a. **PHONE OR EMAIL WHERE CITIZENS CAN REACH YOU:**
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2. **Why are you running for School Board?**

I am running for re-election to continue the work begun six years ago. Ferndale Schools are updating our strategic plan, increasing academic success, working to improve racial and economic equity, and continue on our sustainable path.

3. **If you have children, do they attend Ferndale Public Schools? Why or why not?**

Yes, my youngest is a senior at Ferndale High School and her older siblings are FHS graduates. Ferndale Schools are an outstanding place to learn, to prepare for college, and thrive in a diverse and engaging school community.

4. **What specific experiences have you had that prepare you to serve on the School Board?**

I have served on the school board for the past six years, including three years as president. In that time, we have forthrightly addressed student achievement, equity, racism, as well as restructured our schools and administrative costs to secure a healthy rainy day fund balance. The school board has done this in partnership with staff, parents, students and the community. We've increased transparency in concrete ways, such as making

our board packets readily accessible on the internet and having meetings available on YouTube. I will continue to listen to our community and all stakeholders to inform my judgment and make policy decisions over my next four-year term.

5. What do you see as the appropriate role of a School Board Member when they disagree with an action of the Superintendent?

First, board members have to stay in the governance and policy-making lane and allow the superintendent to make administrative and operational decisions that are consistent with board policies and the strategic plan. Second, by building a constructive professional relationship with the superintendent, board members serve in an important advisory role to the superintendent when she makes important administrative decisions. Finally, the board as a whole holds the superintendent accountable to the strategic plan, policies and agreed-upon goals through the annual evaluation process. All of this accountability needs to be done in such a way that the board is not micro-managing the superintendent or second-guessing her administrative decisions.

6. How does the district involve citizens in decision making? Please give examples.

We hold large public meetings when major decisions are on the horizon, such as with the strategic planning processes or elementary school restructuring. We listen carefully to citizens in the community and at our meetings. One significant example of this was during the restructuring discussion, we listened at meetings, on Facebook, read emails and website comments, and finally held open a three hour public comment session at the board meeting in which we made our decision. Not everyone will agree with every decision, but they should expect to be heard and their input considered, particularly when the community is closely divided on an issue.

7. How is progress on the strategic plan monitored? Over the past few years, every major decision that the board has made is done in light of the strategic plan. This is an area for improvement, however. In the forthcoming plan, specific objectives will have measureable outcomes and I will advocate that the board and district use a scorecard or other simple report to show progress or areas that need improvement.

8. How would you describe the role diversity plays in the district?

The district's diversity is a definite strength. Our nation and the world are diverse places in terms of race, culture, language, points of view, and many other ways. Our district is one of Michigan's most diverse, particularly with respect to race and economics. Our students learn well in that environment and are quite adept in being in a community with people that are different than they are. Our district must always engage its diverse communities with the intention of reaching equity and including all voices and students. Equity means meeting all children's needs, engaging them in reaching their dreams, and not perpetuating harmful stereotypes of the past.

9. What are three assets of the district?

First, our community is a key asset, including the many residents who don't have children in the schools. We must always work hard to engage with the full community, including young adults, seniors, businesses, non-profits and leaders in all four constituent municipalities. Second, the breadth and depth of our educational and extra-curricular programs are an asset and are frequently being renewed and expanded, such as our new Social Emotional Learning curriculum to help all students engage with their emotions and truly engage in the Ferndale learning community. Third, the commitment that our teachers and staff have to our students and their success is a key asset. Without all of us moving in alignment, our students would not be as successful.

10. Name three ways the district could improve.

First, we must continue to make the district more equitable, particularly with respect to our offering honors and Advanced Placement courses. Second, we need to carefully review our 20-year facilities needs so that students are not learning 21st century concepts in classrooms that were designed a century ago. There are so many flexible classroom configurations that can be available if we invest in modernizing our buildings, now that we have a district with the right number and configuration of buildings. Finally, we need to regularly report on progress on the strategic plan, once the board completes and approves the forthcoming update of the plan.