

Central PTO Forum - Questions & Answers

Matt Knickerbocker

1). What do you think our schools are doing right to prepare students for a successful future? What do you think could be improved upon and how would you make that happen?

A: Bethel schools now rank among the highest performing in New England, and have earned national recognition in many areas. This did not come easily or quickly. This high level of performance is the result of 20 years of outstanding educational leadership, hard work by our excellent teachers and support staff members, and, perhaps most importantly, the financial support by this community that has ensured our teachers have the resources they need. This success is facilitated by several important factor.

First is the belief that every child can succeed. This is a core value that defines our schools at every level and is expected of every staff member. Our staff uses real time data to quickly assess progress in learning and make adjustments to ensure every child has what they need to succeed.

Second is the focus on helping our students grow and become responsible for their own education. Education today is much more than reading a book or sitting in a classroom listening to a lesson. To truly become independent critical thinkers, children need to “learn how to learn.” They must know how to seek out and evaluate information and apply it to the real world.

The third factor is our amazingly talented educational leaders who are looking deeply into the future and devising strategies to help our kids succeed. This didn’t happen by accident. Over the past two decades we’ve been fortunate to have many people serve on our school board who worked collaboratively to ensure excellence in our schools. They have consistently made excellent hiring choices.

A discussion was held recently at one of Dr. Carver’s Business Advisory group meetings about a report by the World Economic Forum, which predicts that by 2022, more than 50% of all workers will require additional skills or retraining in order to succeed. That is a staggering prediction, but what impresses me is these are the kinds of things our education leaders are thinking about and preparing our young graduates to be prepared for.

If there is one improvement I would like to see, it would be more focus on how our government works to help our graduates become effective participants in our democracy. However, I well understand the enormous curriculum requirements already placed on our teachers and students. To help, I have offered to serve as a guest speaker to any class or after school club to discuss American government. My office has also reached out to let our staff know about public hearing and town meeting dates to help students understand the process. I have crafted a one-hour

PowerPoint presentation that describes how traditional New England town meeting form of government works and how it differs from other forms of local government in the US. I have presented this at Parent University and would be happy to present it to students, as well.

2). How will you ensure schools cultivate engaged and informed citizens, ready to work together across differences and actively participate in our democracy?

A: This is a topic that is critically important to the future of our nation, and I think Bethel's schools are already doing a much better job than most.

A great example is the annual Veteran's Day assembly held at Bethel High each November. The students are always attentive and respectful of the veterans who attend each year. Each program is carefully crafted to highlight important events occurring in our nation and put them in context with our nation's history. Lt. Commander Dwinells and Mr. Troetti and the administrative team deserve a great deal of credit for the positive effects these types of events have on our students.

However, I think there is more we can do. I believe one of the greatest challenges we face as a nation is learning how to disagree and discuss each other's point of views with respect and civility. The old saying that religion and politics shouldn't be discussed in polite company is very misguided. Our children need to learn about and respect each other's religious backgrounds, and our nation was literally founded on political disagreements. Discussing and debating political issues is engrained in our culture. I think providing more opportunities for students to discuss controversial topics in a well-supervised and completely unbiased forum would be highly beneficial.

I will add, as I have said in many forums, that we also need to do a better job of educating people about how their local government works. The big global topics that are on the nightly news get all the attention, of course, but your local government has a bigger influence on your daily activities. How well your schools are performing, how well they are funded, who governs your schools and town, what kinds of recreational opportunities your town offers, the economic future of your community, how well your public water system is performing are all functions of your local government. Especially here in New England, the birth place of our nation and the only place where the original "town meeting" form of government still exists, we must have informed and engaged citizens for our communities to succeed.

In the past I have participated in many career-day events at both the high school and the middle school. I have been greatly impressed by the comments and questions our students ask. I would like to see more such opportunities and I will always participate and help facilitate them in any way I can.

3). How would you build consensus and support in the community around the work of the school district?

A: In order for any community to realize the full benefits of its schools, there must be total engagement between school and town governing bodies, and this is an area in which Bethel now sits head and shoulders above the vast majority of communities in our state. Great schools are vital to every member of the community, whether every household has school-age children or not. The reputation of the schools is the most important factor in defining the reputation of the entire community. Great schools make a great town. Great schools also help protect property values when economic downturns hit, as they inevitably do.

It is essential that the “town” and “school” governing bodies communicate well, understand each other’s challenges and work collaboratively. No community will ever realize the full potential of their schools if there is friction between the town and school governance, and unfortunately, this describes many communities in our state. Bethel was no different not too many years ago when I first became your First Selectman. Our community has worked very hard to elect people capable of setting partisanship aside and work to make our schools what they are today.

Even though town and school governance are mostly separate from one another under Connecticut law, I view my role as First Selectman as being a champion for our schools. I strongly supported the Rockwell and Johnson school renovation projects now under way and helped bring those to a successful referendum. I attend as many school events as my schedule will allow and help celebrate our students’ successes, like our national champion marching band, our award-winning theatre program and our students’ academic and athletic accomplishments.

4). If you were to send a personal newsletter to every Bethel household, on which three main issues would center your update?

A: This is a somewhat hard question to answer because Dr. Carver and her team already do such an excellent job of communicating with the town through her weekly e-newsletter. For a newsletter of my own, I would focus on my efforts at the state level to protect education funding:

- 1) Update on our ongoing lobbying at the state legislature to protect education funding to local towns in order to ease the property tax burden.
- 2) Updates on the fight against the growth of unfunded mandates that consume valuable educational dollars and drive up costs.
- 3) Information our residents need to make an informed decision at budget time, such as the amount of school costs that appear on the “town” side of our bifurcated budget, as well as updates on crucial town operations and improvements.

5). What are your qualifications for running for First Selectman?

A: I think it is ironic that at election time, most discussions seem to center on political issues, and yet 99% of the job of First Selectman has nothing whatsoever to do with politics. Rather, day to day activities focus exclusively on management functions. It is very complex and has a very long learning curve. It's a profession. The majority of towns in American hire certified, degreed city managers to perform the duties that the First Selectman has here in Bethel.

My qualifications include thirty years of executive management in private industry, seven years as chair of the Bethel Board of Education and ten years as the town's chief elected official. I hold a master's degree in public administration (MPA) and a BS degree in marketing.

I also work extensively at the regional level to advocate for Bethel. I am a member of the board of directors with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM), a lobbying and support organization that represents all Connecticut towns and cities at the capital. I am chair of the CCM transportation subcommittee and a member of the education subcommittee. This year I am also serving as chair of the Housatonic Resource Recovery Authority (HRRA), the regional waste and recycling body that sets policy and operates the area hazardous waste disposal events. I am also a board trustee with CIRMA, the non-profit insurance authority that provides the town's workers compensation and liability insurances.

Prior to joining town government, I devoted many years to developing our marching band program as a founding member of the Bethel Band Boosters. I was also a member of the All Sports Booster Club and coached T-ball when our children were very young.

6). Do you like the non-binding "Too Hi/Too Low" questions included on the referendum ballot? Why or why not?

A: No, I am strongly in favor of eliminating this question from the town charter, for several reasons.

First, the question provides no meaningful guidance to the Board of Finance. The question was originally added to the Charter decades ago to guide decision making if the budget vote failed. However, in literally every budget referendum in the past 20 years, the result has always been "Too High," even when the budget wins approval by a wide margin. Board of Finance members should be able to discern public sentiments through the public hearing and town meeting process.

Second, it makes the ballot more confusing. Audits show some voters leave the actual budget question blank, but check only the "Too high" box instead. It would appear they believe checking "Too High" by itself counts as a vote, but it does not.

Third, removing this line will allow room for other issues to be added to the ballot, such as when there are multiple high-value capital items that should be voted on separately.

7). How would you balance having good schools with affordability?

A: This is probably the most difficult question to answer because that decision is made by voters with each budget referendum.

However, it is our responsibility as elected officials to work with our school administration to prioritize school and town needs and balance them the town's ability and willingness to cover the costs. As we have discussed, the most important element in this equation is communication with the community to ensure every voter understands the value that high performing schools bring to the community.

I would also like to point out, again, that we have one of the most trustworthy school leadership teams I have ever known. It would be impossible to meet our collective goals without this relationship. In the decade I spend as a school board member and as a First Selectman, I meet officials from around the state, and I can tell you from personal experience that Dr. Carver and Ms. Yonsky know how to stretch a buck better than anyone I've even met. Their budget work is simply outstanding. By working together with our school officials and Board of Education, we have built a strong collaborative relationship between school and town government that helps all of us maximize the funding provided by our community.

8). How would you work within the community to get more people, including those without children, involved and supportive of issues facing our schools?

A: This can only be done through very thorough outreach and communication with town residents. I would like to commend Dr. Carver and her administrative team on the weekly newsletters sent out by her office. Her newsletters are excellent and have become a very important tool in keeping the community connected with our schools.

My office transmits much of this information to residents who do not receive the school's newsletter via the town's electronic newsletter and social media pages. I believe it is very important to celebrate our student's successes and accomplishments and to provide an opportunity for those without school children to feel a collective sense of pride and ownership.

It's also important that our town residents know of the great work of the Bethel Education Foundation. Most people outside of the school community are unaware of this dedicated, hardworking group of volunteers, and they are amazed to hear the of the funding the Foundation has provided to all of our schools, including St. Mary's, to provide opportunity grants for our teachers.

Lastly, our students spend a great deal of time doing volunteer work around the town. They have placed flags for Memorial Day, raked out the flower beds at town hall in the spring, hosted events to raise money for the Scotty Fund and the Bethel food pantry and other organizations. Our students are very visible in the community and we do our best to spread the good news and highlight their work for all to appreciate. Our students have created a very positive image for our town.

9). What role do you think students should have in the political process?

A: I would like to see far more involvement in the political process, as I alluded to in one of the answers above.

I graduated high school in a small midwestern town in the early 1970's, and our school used to run mock presidential elections. Students would volunteer to play the roles of the major candidates; the issues of the day would be discussed in classrooms and a vote would be taken the day before the actual national election. As an interesting side note, our high school's vote in 1968 accurately predicted Richard Nixon's victory.

Today I believe it is difficult for teachers to allow discussion of sensitive or controversial topics in their classrooms. And while I appreciate just how much material every teacher is expected to cover in a relatively short academic year, it's a shame not to capitalize on elections as learning opportunities.

As I stated previously, I am very willing to spend time in our schools, either as a guest speaker during class time or for an after-school activity, to help our young people understand the unique system of government we have and the many benefits of participation.

10). Looking ahead, what do you think are the biggest issues over the next 5 to 10 years and how will you address them?

A: In reading about the trends in science and technology, I believe one of the big challenges to education in the next decade will be in preparing our graduates for a world that changes even more rapidly than the incredible pace we already see today. Artificial intelligence is just over the horizon and beginning to filter into the workplace, and it will have profound implications for our workforce. It is literally the case that within a few years of graduation, new career paths that never existed will be invented and some that seemed like a safe bet just a few years earlier will disappear, almost overnight.

The challenge this presents to our educators is in preparing our graduates for this very changeable and uncertain future. We use the phrase "becoming life-long learners" quite often,

and this is really the main goal. When a student steps out of high school, or trade school, or college or graduate school, they will find out they are not done. Studies are showing that they will need to be adaptable and continue to learn throughout their careers, no matter what they choose.

In order for our teachers to prepare our graduates for this world, our school must also adapt. This will undoubtedly put demands on staffing levels and will force towns to continue to invest in the new technologies that our kids will need to use in the real world. There will be a constant refreshing of both curriculum and the technological tools of teaching as they evolve at an accelerating pace.

I will support these investments, as I have done consistently since joining our town government as a school board member in 1999. I will continue to do so, and I sincerely hope my successors who occupy this office in the future do as well. The success of our schools defines our town more than any other single factor.

11). With increasing school enrollments, what additional measures will you take to ensure residency requirements are validated?

A: This is a problem that every community with great schools faces from time to time. But fortunately, the perception of this problem is far worse than the reality. Our school board has instituted a very thorough and rigorous screening process and will take aggressive steps, including hiring private investigators when necessary to ensure compliance.

In addition, the town always commits its resources to help identify illegally used addresses to try to skirt the screening process. When necessary, we engage the office of the Fire Marshall to identify illegal apartments that people may try to use to falsely establish residency, as well as the Bethel police department. I understand why parents seek the best education possible for their children, but this is a crime.

12). As more families move to town, we are facing two significant challenges: First, larger class sizes, and second, increased expenses for services for our growing ELL and special needs populations. Addressing these needs will undoubtedly require more resources. Will you support this need this spring when budget season comes along?

A: This will be the shortest answer you'll hear from me tonight.

Yes, I will continue to support our schools, as I have consistently in the past.

It is a fact that in the United States, all schools are still primarily funded and governed at the local level, just like in the 19th century. If we do not provide the essential resources our kids need

to learn and succeed, no one else will. To fail to do this will create even greater burdens on our society in the future.

You can count me in.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this forum.

- *Matt Knickerbocker*