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VOTER HUB

General Election 2026

Easy-to-read explainers on the Escondido school boards races.
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What does a school board member do?

School board trustees oversee a school district's budget and create school policies in compliance with state and federal public education laws. The board approves curriculum and is responsible for hiring and evaluating the superintendent, but the superintendent and administration run the day-to-day operations of the school district.

School boards also approve the district's Local Control and Accountability Plan. The three-year plan sets goals for student outcomes and outlines how the district will achieve and pay for them.

Why do we vote for school board members?

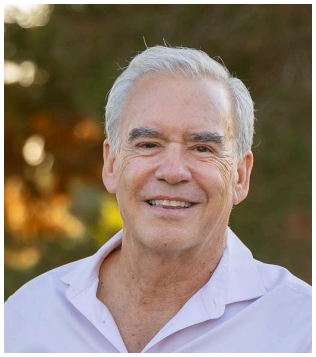
School board trustees are elected by geographic areas for a term of four years. Although these trustees represent the entire school district as a collective board, each member represents the schools and members of the public in a particular area or district. The public votes for trustees because these representatives shape the present and future budget and policies of public schools. Voting offers the public an opportunity to elect leaders who align with their goals for public education.

Sometimes trustees are parents with kids in the district. Sometimes they're former teachers or other school staff. They might be college professors or business owners who want to make sure students prepare for life after high school. Regardless of their background, board members approve a budget funded by state taxes, local taxes and federal funding and are accountable to their school community for those decisions.

Escondido Union High School District

💵 Board members get paid $240 per month, according to a district spokesperson.

Candidates: Board Area 1



Bob Weller

- **Incumbent:** Yes
- **Professional background:** Governing Board Member, Escondido Union High School District
- **Top endorsements:** none

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

I have worked 40 years in financial services and technology. I have helped Escondido families purchase homes as a mortgage professional for the last 25 years. This has given me deep insight into families' desires, concerns and perspectives on what makes Escondido Union High School District attractive for their students, along with understanding places where we can improve.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

I have had the honor of serving as a governing board member for EUHSD for the last 3.5 years, and I was president of the board in 2024. All four of our children attended schools in the district, with one still in high school. Our family history with Escondido public schools in a rich one. My father-in-law was a teacher and librarian at Escondido High School for 27 years. My wife and her brothers all attended Escondido public schools from kindergarten through high school.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

Our greatest challenge continues to be math and English academic improvement, though over the past four years our high school students have seen a 47% improvement in Math test scores

and a 27.5% improvement in Language Arts scores. Additionally, balancing declining enrollment with teacher and staff employment is a concern for our district. Finally, we need to continue to adapt education to the rapidly changing technological landscape, which will affect all students whether they choose to go to college or directly into skilled trades after high school.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

Our budget priorities are laid out in detail in our Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). We always approach budget priorities by assessing which line items will affect the classroom teacher and student first. We try to make any required cuts as far from the classroom as possible. Due to our prudent fiscal management over the last decade, we've had a budget surplus that has allowed us to protect teacher's jobs, increase their salaries, and keep our classrooms well equipped to meet student needs. I plan to continue this wise fiscal management into the future.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

I am calling for a board workshop that will focus on outlining a comprehensive student and teacher plan for responsible AI use. Like having cell phones and laptops, AI is a reality that students will need to address in the real world, there is no avoiding it. Our goal is to teach students to use AI responsibly and productively. The District currently uses a closed AI system designed for use in k-12 schools.

Regarding phone and device use, our District implemented a no cellphone policy on all campuses in the classroom last year. Teachers have been ecstatic that they no longer need to be the "cell phone police." All students are issued laptops at our schools and District policy requires that a strong content filtering system is installed on each device so that students may use their laptops safely.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

In my first year on the Board, I worked to establish the reasons behind low student achievement and test scores in Math and Language Arts. Although some of the low performance could be attributed to learning loss during COVID shutdowns, there were other components as well. To address the problems we identified, we worked with the administration's teacher professional development program and established a better relationship with our K-8 district, which is a separate district in Escondido. I am deeply thankful for Dr. Martin Casas, our Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, who created a teacher professional development program called The Arc of Learning and Studio Cycle, which had immediate positive impact. As a result, our District was awarded the California School Board Association Golden Bell Award for professional learning success. But our work is not done and in my first year of the new term, I will continue to serve on the Math subcommittee which we created so that we could bring together the elementary and high school district in a continued effort to improve student Math achievement.



Nina Haines

- **Professional background:** Businessowner
- **Top endorsements:** San Diego County Democratic Party

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

I have worked in Accounting most of my adult life, the last 20 plus years as a Controller for profit and non-profits, so fiscal responsibility is important to me. I also started a home care company for seniors, about 15 years ago because I believe in being of service and helping people. I am an avid reader, lifelong learner and lead with empathy and understanding. Fostering harmony and a safe environment to share concerns is what I would bring to the board while looking for win win solutions, when possible.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

I have lived in Escondido for over 8 years and plan on staying as it is my home and community. I don't have children or family that attend public schools there. However, I have employed people that live in Escondido and have children that attend schools there. I think when your schools are safe and offer a good education for your children, it helps foster a positive environment for everyone.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

Fiscal responsibility- I understand Escondido Union High School District 1 has a large budget deficit. Reviewing the budgets is the first task. Then unravelling each item on the budget, reviewing expenses, looking for waste, overcharges, redundancy, etc. Also discussing with staff that booked or created the expense will be some of the first plan of action.

Education- I understand the education levels could use some help. I have talked to several high school students that had recently graduated, they all said the same thing- there was limited opportunity for them to continue their studies in a chosen area (outside of sports) and they felt they had little opportunity to further their studies. I will see what the top high schools are doing

to enable their students to excel and talk to the Teachers and come up with a plan. I will get with area businesses and establish an internship program, where the teenagers can get some real work experience. We will have to focus on technology and make sure they will be ready for college and/or trade schools.

Safety- both mental and physical safety are important to the well being of the students. A safe place to talk about problems and get counselling as well as physical safety. I will make sure there is enough budgeted for mental and physical safety. I would have to see what is in place now before I know what is lacking or how to improve them and be able to offer recommendations.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

I think a thorough review of the current budget will be the first task. Meeting staff and understanding what everyone does is important.

Once that is done, and to start working on the current deficit, somethings will have to go.

I can't really say until I have reviewed it, but negotiation with harmony and looking for a win win solution is how I will lead.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

I would support no cell phone use in class, no AI use for homework and assignments where writing or other research is needed. I think computers and laptops are fine if the work at hand requires it.

However, students must learn about AI in order to stay relevant once they leave school and go into the work force. I think working with teachers and coming up with ideas on how to do both. Learning without AI and then learning with AI.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

I think the first year or half a year would be reviewing the current budget and financials. Also reviewing operations-taking a look at what is in place, meeting with all relevant people, understanding their needs, meeting parents, students, teachers and Unions and beginning a dialog with each so as to understand the problems, understand what they think is working and what is not is what I would try to accomplish.

Candidates: Board Area 2



Mark Lucas

- **Professional background:** Teacher/College Professor
- **Top endorsements:** Escondido Secondary Teachers Association

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?
Having served previously as a school board member and earned a Masters in Governance certification from the California School Boards Association, I know how to lead effectively on day one. Today, as a current teacher and college instructor, I see firsthand what our students and educators need to succeed.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?
I began my teaching career 30 years ago in Escondido. All four of my children have attended Escondido schools.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?
1. Ongoing budget uncertainty.

I will work with my board colleagues, administration, and employees to construct long term budget priorities that can translate into consistent solutions.

2. Student engagement and mental health.

I will work to expand academic support, bolster student mental health services, and campus safety protocols and processes.

3. College and workforce preparedness.

I will support expanding CTE pathways, while promoting increased rigor in our classrooms. I will help build stronger community workforce partnerships and strengthen and expand dual enrollment programs with local colleges.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?
As an educator and former trustee, my absolute priority is keeping resources focused on the classroom. Cuts should be made as far away for the classroom as possible. This involves planning, in advance, what reductions may need to be made prior to the cuts being required.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?
We need to prepare our students to be successful in the workplace and in college. Policies that promote critical thinking and appropriate technology use are what is needed. Policies and procedures that distract students need to be reviewed and improved as needed.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?
Visit stakeholders at every school and department multiple times. On these "learning visits" I will hear first hand what the issues and concerns are at each school and department site.



Joe Hinrichs

- **Professional background:** Public School Teacher
- **Top endorsements:** Republican Party of San Diego County
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

For the past 25 years, I have worked as a classroom teacher in local public schools. Currently, I teach Special Education at Del Dios Academy of Arts and Sciences in Escondido. I have dedicated my career to helping students find success and prepare for college, careers, and life.

As a father, I am deeply passionate about creating educational opportunities for all Escondido families. Running for the Escondido Union High School Board I would consider it an honor to put my experience to work in improving our local high schools as a board member.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

As a special education teacher for 7th and 8th graders at Del Dios Academy of Arts and Sciences in Escondido I have a vested interest in making sure our students go on to a successful four years in high school. Part of my job as a special education teacher is holding transition meetings with parents and helping them consider the correct placement in high-school based on their child's needs and abilities. Not only professionally but also personally I am connected to the district. Four of my children have graduated from high-schools in the district and I still have two kids who are high school students in our local schools.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

Three of my top priorities include increasing collaboration between the elementary and high-school district, strengthening career-technical education programs, and improving how we serve special education students.

Collaboration between the elementary and high-school district is crucial to provide a continuity that boosts students' success for academic growth from kindergarten through 12th grade. As a middle school teacher, I have seen first hand the challenges and opportunities that can come from the transition to high school. I will put that experience to work in aligning our two districts to better serve students.

I believe in strengthening career-technical education because students that anticipate a career in medicine, business, education, the trades, or many other pathways, can fine-tune their efforts and are more likely to remain engaged in their academics. This requires robust career-based classes available to our high schoolers to begin their journey into jobs that match their personal strengths, talents, and ambitions.

Lastly, supporting students and educators in special education is crucial to our district to provide a hopeful future for our students no matter what their ability.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

As a teacher, I have seen the impacts of budget cuts and fiscal strain firsthand in my classrooms over the years. In an era of declining enrollment, increased costs, and limited funding, we must adapt our approach as a district to work with the resources available to us. That means preserving the core services and programs that have the most direct impact on student health, wellness, and academic performance. Budgets reflect our priorities as a district, I will bring my experience from the ground level, to the board room, to ensure our budgetary priorities are reflecting the realities that students and teachers are facing every day on our campuses.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

AI, phones, laptops, and iPads are all very powerful tools to advance and differentiate learning during our students' years in school. But these tools require rigorous training, guidance and restrictions in order to be used effectively and intentionally to advance students' learning and academic growth. Without strict guidance these tools can cripple and stunt the development of students' future skills and growth. It is very important that we in the schools proactively train our students in their digital citizenship to maintain a healthy, proactive, and positive digital footprint. There is a shift among many teachers wanting to get back to pencil, paper, and posters for personal presentations by their students to ensure genuine learning with content that does not rely on tech tools. Research based practices need to be considered to ensure the most effective learning capacity and opportunities using technology.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

In the first year I would try to accomplish a collaboration of career fairs between the high schools and the middle schools in Escondido that would put on display the Career Technical Education (CTE) services available at the high schools so our middle school students in Escondido could begin considering their career pathways while they prepare for high-school. This would give our CTE high school teachers and their students an opportunity to showcase career skills courses that our middle schoolers could take in the future. I would count it a high privilege to see across our elementary district in the next year career fairs that are helping our high school students collaborate with our elementary students to help them get more prepared for their future.



Rafaela Cervantes

- **Professional background:** College Professor
- **Top endorsements:** San Diego County Democratic Party
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

My professional background is rooted in education and a deep commitment to serving students and families. As a Spanish professor with college-level teaching experience, I hold a Child Development Program Director Permit, have completed coursework toward a PK–3 early childhood credential, and have served as a preschool teacher, infant educator, speech clinician, and behavioral technician. These roles give me a comprehensive perspective on student development and the needs of both educators and families. As a board member, I will bring a dedicated teacher's perspective, a focus on strong schools and family engagement, and a commitment to responsible, student-centered decision-making.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

I am an Escondido resident and have a strong connection to the community. Through my work as an infant educator and speech clinician, I have worked directly with Escondido families and understand the importance of supporting children and families. My children did not attend schools in this district because we did not live in Escondido at the time. However, I am a strong believer in public education and the opportunities it provides. I am running because I care deeply about the future of Escondido students, families, educators, and our public schools.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

The district faces significant challenges, including a deficit of more than $16 million, declining enrollment, and academic achievement gaps. We have lost nearly 1,000 students, while about 20% of students are English learners and four out of five students are not meeting math proficiency standards. We need responsible budgeting, stronger enrollment efforts, and targeted academic support. I would prioritize tutoring and math intervention, strengthen support for English learners, engage families, and evaluate programs and spending to ensure resources are focused on student success. We must make our schools financially sustainable while providing every student with the opportunity to succeed.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

I would approach the budget with transparency, fiscal responsibility, and a focus on students. Given the district's deficit, we must carefully review all programs and expenditures to identify efficiencies while protecting classroom instruction and essential student services. I would prioritize teachers, academic support, special education, English learner services, and programs that directly improve student outcomes. Before making cuts, I would seek input from educators, families, and the community and consider the long-term impact of each decision. Every dollar should be spent responsibly and aligned with student success.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

I believe AI can be an important tool for learning when it is used as a support rather than a replacement for student work, critical thinking, or creativity. We live in a constantly changing era, and our schools must adapt to advances in technology while also putting safeguards in place to protect students.

I would support clear, age-appropriate policies that define when and how AI can be used for assignments, while maintaining academic integrity. Students should understand that using AI to complete their work or misrepresenting AI-generated work as their own undermines their learning.

I also believe schools should teach students how to use AI safely, ethically, and responsibly. This could include digital citizenship and AI literacy classes that address privacy, misinformation, bias, plagiarism, and responsible use.

For cell phones and other devices, I support reasonable limits during instructional time to reduce distractions, while allowing teachers to use technology when it enhances learning. The goal should not be to fear technology, but to teach students how to use it responsibly and prepare them for a world where these tools will increasingly be part of education, college, and the workplace.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

During my first year on the board, I would focus on three priorities: strengthening the district's financial position, addressing declining enrollment, and improving student achievement. I would work with the board and district leadership to develop a clear plan to address the deficit while protecting classroom instruction and essential student services. I would also prioritize attracting families by strengthening academic programs and identifying programs that make our schools more competitive and appealing. Finally, I would advocate for stronger math support, English learner services, and meaningful family engagement. My goal would be to establish a strong foundation for financially responsible, academically successful schools.

Candidates: Board Area 5



David Vincent

- **Incumbent:** Yes

- **Professional background:** Governing Board Member, Escondido Union High School District
- **Top endorsements:** Republican Party of San Diego County
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

I am a scientist, educator, business owner, and public health professional with more than 30 years of experience in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. I have taught graduate-level courses at San Diego State University and educate young and emerging professionals worldwide in biotechnology, life sciences, and disease prevention. My career has required me to manage people, budgets, and complex projects and make decisions based on data and measurable results. As a current Board member, I bring that same practical, science-based approach to education and focus on preparing students for success in whatever career path they choose.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

My wife and I raised our family in North Escondido, and our three daughters attended local schools. Escondido has been our home and community for many years. My wife currently works as a substitute teacher aide, supporting special-needs and elementary school students in the Escondido Union School District.

Our daughters have taken different paths, which has helped shape how I look at education. One continued her education here in Escondido and is now a Certified Nursing Assistant. Our middle daughter attended a local university and now works in the movie industry, while our oldest pursued a career in life sciences and works as a scientist. Their experiences remind me that there is no single path to success and that our schools need to help students find the path that is right for them.

I currently represent Trustee Area 5 on the Escondido Union High School District Board. During my time on the board, I have made it a priority to visit campuses and speak directly with teachers, staff, students, and administrators. Board members should hear from the people in our schools every day, rather than relying only on reports presented at meetings.

My daughters are adults now, so I don't currently have a child attending an EUHSD school. However, through my wife's work, my service on the board, and our family's long history in Escondido schools, public education remains an important part of our family's life.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

I see three major challenges: continuing to improve academic achievement and student well-being, maintaining long-term fiscal responsibility, and preparing students for what comes after high school.

First, we need to keep improving academically, particularly in math and English language arts. Working with our teachers and staff, we have made progress. Over the past four years, district performance improved by 10% in mathematics and 14.7% in English language arts, but we still have work to do. Another board member and I helped establish a Mathematics Subcommittee to examine the data more closely and understand what is working. That effort has also brought elementary and high school math educators together to help students make a stronger transition into high school. Academic success also means supporting student well-being and strengthening parental involvement. Schools work best when teachers, students, and parents are working together.

Second, we need to maintain long-term fiscal responsibility. We have an obligation to taxpayers and our community to use our resources wisely, maintain appropriate reserves, and protect the programs and services that have the greatest impact on students. When making budget decisions, my priority is keeping resources as close to the classroom as possible.

Third, we need to prepare students for life after graduation. College is one path, but it isn't the only one. I support expanding career-technical education and working with teachers, counselors, colleges, and local employers so that students have opportunities whether they choose a university, a community college, a technical career, a skilled trade, or the workforce.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

My approach to the district budget is pretty straightforward: protect the classroom, spend responsibly, and think about the long-term consequences of the decisions we make today.

Maintaining healthy reserves is important, especially when school funding can change from year to year. Those reserves provide some protection during difficult years and can help prevent sudden cuts that directly affect students and teachers.

If cuts become necessary, I would first look at administrative costs, duplication, programs that are not producing results, and other areas where we can operate more efficiently before cutting programs that directly serve students or reducing support for teachers and staff.

Ultimately, we are responsible for taxpayer dollars. We should be able to explain where the money is going and how that spending benefits our students. Maintaining long-term fiscal responsibility has been one of my priorities on the board.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

I believe cell phones should be put away during classroom instruction. Teachers should be able to teach without competing with texting, social media, and other distractions. At the same time, I understand why parents want their children to have access to a phone in an emergency.

One approach I support is classroom cell phone lockers. Students put their phones away during instruction, but the phones remain accessible if there is a legitimate emergency. I think that is a reasonable balance. This is one of the policies that our school board implemented.

AI is different. I don't think simply banning AI is realistic. Our students are going to encounter AI in college, technical careers, and the workplace. We should teach them how to use it responsibly while making sure they are still doing their own thinking and learning.

I am also concerned about unnecessary screen time. Laptops and technology can be valuable educational tools, but that doesn't mean students need to spend the entire school day looking at a screen. They still need interaction with teachers, reading, writing, discussion, problem-solving, and hands-on learning.

Technology should help teachers teach and students learn. It shouldn't become a distraction or a replacement for good teaching.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

Since I am already serving on the board, I look at this as the first year of my next term rather than starting over.

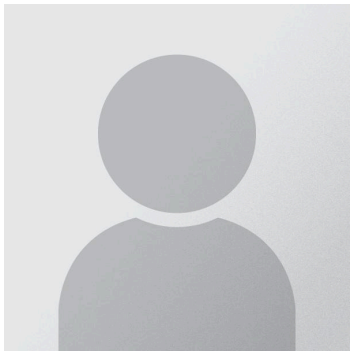
I want to continue the work we have started on academic achievement, particularly mathematics. The Mathematics Subcommittee was created because another board member and I wanted to understand more than just the test scores. We wanted to know what is working, what isn't, and what we can learn from our teachers.

I also want to continue strengthening career-technical education. Students need different pathways after graduation, whether that means college, technical education, skilled trades, or entering the workforce. I want us to continue giving students more of those opportunities.

Something else that is very important to me is our teachers and staff. During my time on the board, I have spent a lot of time visiting campuses and talking directly with them. I intend to continue doing that because you learn things from those conversations that you don't always learn sitting at a board meeting.

We ask a lot of our teachers. We need to listen to them, maintain safe classrooms, provide the resources they need, and continue looking for ways to improve their working environment.

For me, success is pretty simple: students doing better and good teachers wanting to stay and build their careers here.



Georgine Tomasi

- **Top endorsements:** San Diego County Democratic Party, Escondido Secondary Teachers Association
- **Website:** Visit site

Editor's note: *This candidate did not respond to the questionnaire.*

Escondido Union School District

💵 Board members get paid $2,000 per month, **according to the board's policies.**

Candidates: Board Area 2



Chris Ranglas

- **Professional background:** University Project Manager
- **Top endorsements:** Republican Party of San Diego County
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

Professional Background: Systems and technical project manager with deep experience in higher education information technology at UC San Diego, managing complex operations, systems, and budgets.

Personal Background: Escondido father of four children attending local schools, and an active community volunteer. Raised by a single mother who taught college mathematics, instilling a lifelong appreciation for public education.

Perspective Brought to the Board: A practical, common-sense approach focused on inspiring student curiosity, expanding extracurriculars and athletics, balancing classroom technology. A focus on accountability, maximizing existing facilities, and ensuring district resources are directed toward student success and educator support rather than administrative box-checking.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

We have 4 children attending public school in Escondido, CA. I have coached sports at their middle school for the last 4 years. My wife and I volunteer at their schools whenever we can.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

Addressing Declining Enrollment: Reversing this trend by returning our neighborhood public schools to core academic excellence, ensuring they are the top choice for local families.

Strengthening the K-8 Experience: Inspiring student curiosity, expanding extracurriculars and youth sports, and using technology mindfully as a tool rather than an overused distraction.

Bridging Homes and Classrooms: Unifying parents, teachers, and staff around a transparent curriculum, safe facilities, and efficient schedules that prevent student and teacher burnout.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

I would focus on modernizing outdated and costly processes.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

We need to keep mobile devices put away during the school day and teach students how to use AI responsibly.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

Expanded after school programming including more inter school competitive athletics would be a top priority for me.



Elizabeth Shulok

- **Professional background:** Parent/Education Advocate
- **Top endorsements:** San Diego County Democratic Party, Escondido Elementary Educators Association
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

After earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics, I worked as a software engineer, specializing in data management and technical writing. I started my own business 19 years ago after starting our family and learned how to manage it alongside raising three kids. I went back to school in 2016 to earn a Master of Information and Data Science from UC Berkeley. With my analytical background, I believe in making data-informed decisions, setting measurable goals, and getting input from stakeholders across the district.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

All three of my children attended EUSD schools: Bernardo Elementary and Quantum Academy. Although my youngest is now a freshman in high school, I had at least one child in EUSD for 14 years.

From the time my oldest was in kindergarten, I have volunteered in multiple roles at their schools, including helping out in the classroom, chaperoning field trips, and teaching after-school coding classes. I have also served on Quantum Academy's School Site Council as well as on multiple district-level committees where I had the chance to hear from parents across the district, as well as teachers, librarians, paraeducators, principals, and cabinet members.

I have worked as a substitute noon supervisor at numerous school sites and have seen first-hand the hard work that goes into keeping our students safe on campus. I have attended board meetings regularly over the last six years, and for the past three years I have been writing about our school board, district events, and school programs in my District Voices of Escondido newsletter on Substack.

This work has helped me make connections with stakeholders across the district. One of those connections was with the Escondido Education Foundation, which provides grants to EUSD teachers. I officially joined the board of the Escondido Education Foundation this summer after promoting their grants and events in my newsletter.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

The first challenge to address is the fallout from recent board decisions that have eroded trust with employees and the public, including a 400% board member pay raise and a contentious appointment. Returning the focus to our students requires rebuilding relationships with employees through honest and open communication, starting by directly addressing the open questions surrounding the delayed board member resignation that allowed for an appointment rather than voter choice.

I also support reducing the board's compensation to its pre-raise level, adjusted for inflation, and tying any future raises to the same percentage increases employees receive.

The second challenge to address is student achievement. Although test scores have risen in recent years, there is work to be done. Early intervention is key to keeping students from falling further behind, and before- and after-school programs can help bridge the gaps for students who need extra help. We need to examine data across school sites and determine what efforts work and how to expand on them.

The third challenge: how do we get the benefits of technology in the classroom without the drawbacks? Research shows heavy screen use is associated with reduced test scores, lower reading retention, and worse handwriting. When I served on EUSD's Design Team and District Advisory Committee, many parents favored reduced screen time, and teachers were frustrated with device-associated behavioral issues.

For students without devices or reliable home internet, the classroom is often their only access to basic digital literacy like typing, evaluating online sources, and navigating software. But there's a difference between targeted use for specific tasks and iPads as the default platform for learning.

Our youngest learners need to build foundational skills in literacy, writing, and math; our older students need the digital skills required in today's workforce. Getting that balance right across grades is key.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

I think the budget should be centered on students and the outcomes we are aiming to achieve, and budget decisions should be data-informed. By looking at achievement gaps, enrollment trends, daily attendance, and participation in afterschool programs, we can determine what spending moves the needle toward our goals.

When it comes to potential budget cuts, I have three core values: put students first, consider alternate funding, and seek stakeholder input.

First, I want to protect the classroom. Student learning and safety are the highest priority. While it might seem logical to cut elective programs or counseling services, these often keep kids engaged and motivated to attend school, which supports higher academic achievement. Protecting the classroom means taking a hard look at administrative overhead and long-term liabilities like facilities maintenance and outside contracts before cutting funding for staff and programs that serve students directly. The most responsible cuts may not be the most visible.

Second, I would want to look at alternative funding sources and more efficient use of state funds. Are there grants we can apply for to help meet budget shortfalls? Can we use the funds for afterschool programs to acquire resources that can be reused for classes during the school day? Are there community partners we can engage to augment our core programs?

Third, and arguably the most important, when cuts need to be made, they should be made with transparency and community input. Site-level and district-level committees are already in place and can be used to get input from stakeholders in various roles across the district. While data is informative, parents, teachers, counselors, and others at our school sites offer diverse perspectives on the needs of our students and how cuts might impact them.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

While many parents want their children to have a phone with them for emergencies or changes to afterschool pickup plans, phones are a distraction during classroom instruction. EUSD schools require phones to be in backpacks during the school day, which is a policy I support.

My older two kids did not have a dedicated iPad at school until 4th grade at Quantum Academy, which was designed around a 1:1 iPad ratio. Virtual instruction in 2020 required students across the district at all grade levels to have a dedicated device. That policy persisted when students returned to campus full-time in 2021. The district has recently revisited this policy, especially for the youngest grades, based on community feedback and research on the impact of technology on academic performance.

I support policies that specifically address the problems with technology use. I believe technology in the classroom should be intentional, creative rather than passive, and should lead to measurable increases in academic achievement. Policies should continue to be crafted with input from educational leaders and parents, using the committees the district already has in place.

Artificial intelligence is a more challenging problem. I think we need to address it rather than simply ban it. Students need to build foundational skills in the classroom without reliance on artificial intelligence. But older students need to understand how AI works and how it can be

used as an effective tool. AI literacy, like basic digital literacy, is becoming an essential skill across industries. However, AI use by students should be intentional for specific tasks, not a default tool for routine assignments. Modern education needs to adapt to the speed of technological advancement so our students are prepared for the 21st century workforce while still ensuring they have the foundational skills needed to succeed.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

In my first year, I want to focus on improving communication between the board and the public.

Currently, public comments are limited to those who can attend meetings in person and there is no easy way for the community to share comments with the board online.

I want to explore allowing e-comments to be submitted online as the high school district allows. And while the high school only allows comments to be shared privately with the board, I think EUSD should have an option for comments to be shared publicly, letting residents see the range of community input. The City of Escondido already does this, providing access to archived written public comments.

During the pandemic, I took advantage of the opportunity to give public comments over Zoom. I want to explore how to make this option available regularly as the City of Escondido is now doing. Parents with young kids or those who work evenings cannot easily attend meetings in person, so we miss out on hearing their perspectives.

I would also like to make board member reports more accessible. During board meetings, board members report on site visits, committee meetings, and other events they have attended since the last board meeting. Although these reports exist somewhere in board meeting videos or transcripts, they're not easy for the public to find. Families in the district should be able to easily see what work board members are doing outside of board meetings, and we should explore options to make that work more visible on the EUSD website.

I don't expect to overhaul anything in year one. But I do think with at least two other board members, we can make meaningful changes to broaden access to public comments and improve transparency into the work of the board.

Candidates: Board Area 4



Zesty Harper

Incumbent: Yes

- **Professional background:** Governing Board Member, Escondido Union School District
- **Top endorsements:** none
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

My professional background includes serving as both a teacher and a parent in this district, giving me firsthand experience with our schools from multiple perspectives. I understand the challenges and opportunities facing students, families, and staff because I have lived them. For eight years, I have had the privilege of serving on the Board of Education, where I have worked to support student achievement, responsible stewardship of taxpayer resources, and transparent decision-making. I bring a balanced perspective, a commitment to listening, and a deep dedication to ensuring every student has access to a high-quality educational experience.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

My connection to the Escondido Union School District is both personal and lifelong. My husband and I are lifelong Escondido residents, and all of our children, as well as my husband and I, attended Escondido schools. Because of those experiences, our family has a deep appreciation for the role our schools play in shaping students and strengthening our community.

As a parent, former teacher, and board member, I have seen firsthand the impact that dedicated educators, supportive families, and strong schools can have on children's lives. Our roots in Escondido run deep, and we care greatly about the future of this city.

We love Escondido and want to see it continue to flourish. I believe that investing in our students is one of the most important ways to build a stronger future. Today's students are tomorrow's leaders, business owners, educators, and community members. I am committed to supporting opportunities that help every student succeed and prepare them to lead and contribute to the community we all call home.

What are your district’s three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

I believe our district's three biggest challenges are student achievement, school safety, and fiscal responsibility.

For student achievement, we must continue using data to drive decision-making and focus on what works. This means strengthening direct instruction, supporting students based on their individual needs, and investing in programs that demonstrate measurable results. We have a responsibility to continually evaluate outcomes and ensure our efforts are helping students succeed academically.

School safety is another critical priority. We have implemented numerous safety systems and protocols to protect our students and staff. Equally important, we work closely with families, law enforcement, and other community partners to create nurturing, caring school environments where students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.

Fiscal responsibility is essential to maintaining a strong district. We use data to ensure every dollar is spent wisely and that programs are producing results that justify the investment. We also make decisions with an eye toward the future, recognizing that financial planning must extend several years ahead. While many districts have faced difficult layoffs, our district has avoided that outcome through careful budgeting, thoughtful long-term planning, and a commitment to evaluating each vacancy to determine whether it is truly necessary to fill. This approach allows us to protect both our financial stability and the programs and services that support students.

One of the board’s responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district’s budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

I believe budget decisions should be guided by data, accountability, and a clear focus on student success. Every dollar we spend should support our district's mission and produce meaningful results for students.

I approach budget priorities by evaluating whether programs and services are effectively meeting the needs of our students and delivering measurable outcomes. Programs that demonstrate success and positively impact student achievement should continue to receive the support necessary to thrive. At the same time, we must be willing to assess programs that are not producing the desired results and make adjustments when needed.

Effective budget oversight also requires looking beyond the current year. School districts must plan several years ahead to prepare for changing enrollment, rising costs, and uncertainties in state and federal funding. With the chronic underfunding of public education, it is more important than ever that we use every taxpayer dollar wisely and strategically.

Our district has already taken proactive steps to strengthen our financial position and prepare for potential funding challenges. Through thoughtful planning, careful spending, and ongoing evaluation of programs and staffing needs, we have implemented multiple strategies to buffer the district from unknown state and federal funding cuts while protecting our employees and maintaining the quality of the programs and services our students rely on.

My goal is to continue supporting a balanced approach that prioritizes student learning, values our employees, and ensures the long-term financial stability of the district. Responsible stewardship of public funds is one of the most important responsibilities of a board member, and I take that responsibility seriously.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

I believe we need to find the right balance when it comes to artificial intelligence and student device use. Technology is an important tool and prepares students for the world they will enter after graduation, but it should enhance learning, not replace it.

Our responsibility as educators is to help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, research, and communication skills so they can become independent and self-reliant learners. While AI can be a valuable resource, students must still learn how to think for themselves, analyze information, ask questions, and put in the hard work required to master a subject. Technology should broaden learning opportunities, not become a substitute for independent thought.

I support policies that encourage the responsible and age-appropriate use of AI and devices in the classroom while minimizing distractions. Cell phones should not interfere with learning, and technology should be used with clear educational objectives and appropriate supervision. At the same time, we should teach students how to use emerging technologies ethically and effectively, as these tools will continue to play a significant role in their future education and careers.

Ultimately, our goal should be to ensure that technology supports student learning while preserving the development of the critical thinking and self-reliance skills that are essential for long-term success.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

During my next term on the board, I want to build on the success and positive momentum our district has created. Over the past several years, we have made significant progress in expanding student supports, strengthening academic programs, enhancing school safety, and maintaining the fiscal stability of the district. My goal is to continue moving that work forward and ensure we remain focused on what matters most: student success.

Escondido Union School District is doing so many amazing things for students and families. From innovative educational programs and expanded learning opportunities to family support services and community partnerships, our district is committed to meeting the needs of every child. I want to continue supporting these efforts while using data and input from students, families, staff, and the community to identify additional opportunities for growth and improvement.

I also want to ensure that we continue preparing students for success in an ever-changing world by strengthening programs that promote academic achievement, critical thinking, creativity, and

career readiness. Every student deserves access to a high-quality education that equips them with the skills and confidence to achieve their goals.

Above all, I want to help ensure that the students and families of Escondido continue to receive the world-class education they deserve. Strong schools create strong communities, and investing in our students is one of the best investments we can make in the future of our city. By building on our successes and maintaining a clear focus on students, we can create an even brighter future for Escondido and the next generation of leaders who will call this community home.



Maggie Cascio

- **Professional background:** School Volunteer
- **Top endorsements:** Escondido Elementary Educators Association
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

I've served the San Diego County Registrar of Voters as an Election Worker Specialist, in many different roles, every major election for 18 years. I've trained poll workers who staff our polling places, and the logistics teams who support Vote Centers and return the voted ballots every night during an election cycle. This work has given me deep experience managing teams, maintaining accuracy under tight deadlines, and building trust through clear, consistent processes. It's taught me what it takes to run complex operations responsibly and transparently - skills I believe translate directly to effective, accountable governance on a school board.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

We've had children in public schools for fifteen years. In that time, I've volunteered in classrooms, served on PTA boards, Design Thinking teams, organized fundraisers, participated in School Site Councils, and worked on campus as an Instructional Aide. This hands-on involvement gave me a close view of the real challenges schools face, including balancing tight budgets while meeting the needs of students, teachers, and staff. I've also seen what works:

students are best served when the board, administrators, teachers, staff, and families all work together toward shared goals. That collaborative, community-rooted perspective is what I'll bring to the school board.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

Challenge 1: Student Achievement

Every student deserves a strong academic foundation, and I'm committed to strengthening core math and reading skills, the building blocks for everything students will do in life. Our district is diverse, and reaching every student means having a range of tools, not a one-size-fits-all approach. I'll prioritize early intervention to identify struggling students before they fall behind, and ensure our English learners have the customized resources and instruction they need to thrive alongside their peers. Strong, tailored support now means better outcomes later, and this must include social and emotional health support for every child.

Challenge 2: Transparency and Accountability

The majority of our current trustees have lost the trust of teachers, staff, parents, and the community. Their self-serving actions are wasting the district's time, attention, and money. This unfortunate situation is why I felt compelled to run for this position. A strong school board starts with transparency: every decision should be open and clear to the public. But leadership should go further. It requires active collaboration with parents and teachers, who are closest to our students. Their voices must be heard and respected in every major decision. Above all, students must be the priority, not politics. By keeping our processes open, our partnerships strong, and politics out of the boardroom, we can rebuild trust and refocus on what matters most: our kids.

Challenge 3: Managing the budget while meeting the students' needs

This will always be a challenge, but made more difficult with the district facing declining enrollment and aging schools. I address these challenges in the following two questions.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

My priority is ensuring every dollar in our district budget is spent wisely, responsibly, and with one clear test in mind: does it improve student success? Sound stewardship also means being proactive. I will actively pursue new and additional funding sources to support our schools, rather than relying solely on existing revenue.

When it comes to directing resources, I believe they should go where they matter most: our teachers and staff, whose work directly drives outcomes for students, and the classrooms they work in. I will advocate for fair compensation and ensure educators have the resources they need to do their jobs well. If budget cuts ever become necessary, I will evaluate every option against the standard of protecting what most benefits students in the classroom.

By tying every spending decision to student success, pursuing new funding opportunities, and standing behind the people who serve our students every day, we can build a stronger, more stable future for our schools and our community.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

This is an area where I don't yet have deep expertise in the latest research and trends, nor a deep knowledge of how technology is used across the various grade levels at EUSD. That said, I take this issue seriously. As a mother of a high schooler and a college student, I share the concerns of families and teachers about the use and overuse of AI and technology by young people, in and out of the classroom.

My general philosophy is that technology should be a tool, not a replacement for human teaching or reading time. Nothing replaces a teacher's (or librarian's!) direct connection with students, and any use of AI, tablets, or other technology in our classrooms should support that relationship, not compete with it or distract from it.

What I can commit to now is that I will approach decisions about AI and device use thoughtfully, prioritize what protects real instructional time and student focus, and stay open to adjusting course as we learn more. This is a fast-changing area, and good governance means staying humble and responsive.

What’s something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

In my first year on the board, I am committed to visiting every school in our district, including the two charter schools, at least once. I want to see firsthand what makes each of our schools unique and see where our students learn and grow every day. I look forward to meeting the teachers, administrators, librarians, classroom aides, nutrition and maintenance teams who make our schools run, and hearing directly from the people doing this essential work.

I also would love to run with any of our district's running clubs throughout the year. Showing up -not just at board meetings, but in the hallways, on the fields, and alongside our students and staff, is how I intend to learn and then lead, in every campus community we serve.

Candidates: Board Area 5



Bonnie Wagner

- **Professional background:** Educator/Project Manager
- **Top endorsements:** San Diego County Democratic Party, Escondido Elementary Educators Association
- **Website:** Visit site

What is your professional background? What experience or perspectives will you bring to the board?

I am a credentialed secondary teacher with ten years experience in middle school and high school classrooms. I taught three years in EUSD, so I have insight into how district policies affect staff and students at school sites. I have worked every day to continue learning, improving my professional practice and the experience of my students. I will bring that commitment to the school board: to constantly seek knowledge, feedback and improvement for our district. I also have experience in Project Management, which will help inform my guidance of the budgets that communicate our district priorities to the school sites.

What is your connection to the district? Do your children or family members attend a public school?

I taught in EUSD for three years, and have continued to be a member of local PTSAs and active in student-centered activities like book fairs. All my immediate family have attended public schools, which have successfully prepared us to follow our chosen career paths. I am a deep believer in the promise of our public education system in our democratic society. We proudly make it possible for anyone to access the American Dream by preparing all students to be productive members of society.

What are your district's three biggest challenges right now, and how would you address them?

Our district budget needs to be rebalanced to focus financial resources on areas that serve students. For example, many of our school sites are aging buildings in need of repair or replacement. We can stop beautifying the district office until the school sites that serve children

are safe from leaks, mold and excessive heat. Likewise, our school board should not have taken a raise larger than the one they offered to the staff who work directly with students.

Teachers and parents agree that smaller class sizes do a better job serving students, and we should work towards finding the money to accomplish that. Declining enrollment gives us an opportunity to allow class sizes to return to levels that were common before the baby boom hit our schools decades ago. This is a financial challenge that we can turn into an opportunity to give parents and teachers the calm, quality classrooms they want.

EUSD needs board members who understand the benefits and risks of emerging technology like AI, and focus on safety instead of trends. Our elementary school district does not need to be exposing our students to data collection to teach them the critical thinking skills they need to excel in the modern world. Let's get back to teaching real life skills using the effective teaching strategies our teachers were trained in, and get the kids off screens.

One of the board's responsibilities is to oversee and approve the district's budget. How would you approach budget priorities and potential cuts?

School districts always have tight budgets, made tighter when we lose students to declining enrollment. We must look for any costs that are not directly related to our mission to serve Escondido students, and redirect that money into necessary programs. Campus beautification is less necessary than providing shade on overheating playgrounds. School board members shouldn't make more than full-time paraeducators for a tenth of the hours dedicated to our schools. As enrollment declines we will likely have tough decisions to make about district administrative staffing levels, as we already employ a larger district level staff than many other districts our size.

By tightening our budgetary focus to student needs, we can improve the quality of education for Escondido students. This, in turn, will entice families to send their students to Escondido public schools, so we can build on programs that work.

Do you think your district should have tighter restrictions on artificial intelligence and student device use, including cell phones and laptops? If so, what kinds of policies would you support?

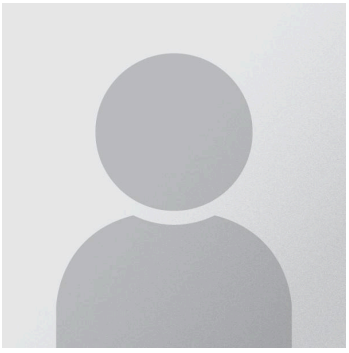
I do think that schools have both allowed and encouraged too much screen time, and too much access on school devices. This is partly driven by salespeople from curriculum and technology companies that promise outsize learning outcomes from using their programs. The truth is that we have a talented professional teaching staff who have been highly trained in engaging hands-on learning, and we should let them take the lead. We only need to spend millions of dollars on curriculum that our staff identifies as necessary and needed.

Our students need to learn to use technology as a tool, but we do not need to provide tech toys for them to take home and access the unfiltered internet. Many studies have now shown how damaging it has been for our children to be constantly on screens, and to be manipulated by online communities without the knowledge of their parents or teachers. Parents spend thousands of dollars to send their children to private schools that achieve their high learning outcomes with hands-on projects and minimal reliance on technology. Our district should do the same.

I would support continued classes that teach specific technology skills that prepare our students for modern jobs, but encourage most classes to focus on hands-on learning experiences that build critical thinking, social and soft skills concurrently with the academic goals. I definitely support a district-wide policy of students not having personal communication devices at school, as they have been central to bullying and increased anxiety issues.

What's something you would try to accomplish during your first year on the board?

School Boards communicate our priorities largely through our budget, so that is a place where I know I can make a difference in the first year. A school board focused on students could noticeably prioritize school site projects, student supports and staff retention. As I've discussed in a previous question, I believe we can also make changes that cost little but achieve better outcomes for our students in terms of safety and focus on learning. By listening to staff members and allowing flexibility for different site needs, we can make fast and responsive changes this year. One of the things parents and staff like about the concept of charter schools is their purported ability to respond to local needs. Our school district should be able to be that responsive; to allow individual sites to serve their local needs and creatively solve issues.



Frank Huston

- **Incumbent:** Yes
- **Top endorsements:** Republican Party of San Diego County
- **Website:** Visit site

Editor's note: *This candidate did not respond to the questionnaire.*

Credits

Katie Anastas
Reporter

Megan Burke
News Editor

Elma González Lima Brandão
Digital Editor



For a full interactive guide, go to kpbs.org/voterhub.

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