



MEET THE CANDIDATES



This November, Inver Grove Heights Schools (ISD 199) voters will vote on the school district's two referendum questions and elect five school board members. Four elected candidates will serve for four years, and one elected candidate will serve for two years.

In this publication, you will find:

- information about each Inver Grove Heights School Board candidate (Pages 2-7)
- information about absentee voting, direct balloting, and Election Day voting (Page 4-5)
- information about the school district's two-question referendum (Page 8)

Meet the School Board Candidates

On November 7, 2023, voters will elect four residents to serve for four years and one resident to serve for two years on the seven-member Inver Grove Heights School District 199 School Board. Elected members will be sworn in during a special school board meeting in January 2024. Seven affidavits of candidacy were received as of August 15, 2023, including four for the four-year seats and three for the two-year seat. One two-year seat candidate, current ISD 199 School Board Chair Matt Schaefer, has since suspended his campaign.

Candidates were asked to complete a district questionnaire and their answers are provided on the following pages to help inform voters. *Responses have only been edited to assist with clarity.*

Candidates for Four-Year Seats (*Four vacancies*)



JAKE KLINGNER (*incumbent*)

Why do you want to serve on the ISD 199 School Board?

I want to continue serving on the school board because I believe in public education. We have to ensure educational opportunities for all students, regardless of where they come from or the beliefs they come to school with. School districts serve all residents from birth to end of life with the services we provide. I will work to protect and strengthen our schools so that all children get the opportunities they need to succeed in life. I can't think of a more important act of service than serving on my school board, right here in my hometown.

What experience do you bring to this position?

I am a lifelong resident of Inver Grove Heights, which gives me historical perspective and a vision of where we might go. I am the proud parent of two students in our schools, which gives me the insight of what is happening in our system. This is also my 18th year as a public school educator, with K-12 experience, including administrative and teacher leadership experience. These experiences have provided me with a broad set of skills that make me uniquely qualified to actively participate in discussions, especially regarding school policy and finance. I do not think I am the only qualified candidate solely because I am a teacher, however I do believe that my teaching background provides a unique and vitally important perspective in the board room.

What are the most important issues concerning the Inver Grove Heights School District and how would you address them?

I try to answer all questions regarding my work in education by first asking "What's best for kids?" Inver Grove Heights is not immune to hyper-politicized issues we see and hear about in the news at the state and national level. An issue I see right now in this election is outside groups influencing candidates and voters to support an agenda that would dismantle public education and answer the question "What's best for parents?"

Specifically at issue is the way concepts of equality and equity are put at odds with each other, instead of being two things that work separately, and then how those concepts are communicated to residents who were last students themselves 20, 30, or more years ago. There are times for equality (equal access to opportunity) and times for equity (individualized supports to ensure access to opportunity). It is important to recognize that certain groups have not ever had equal or equitable access to opportunity, and as a member of the school board, it is my job to enact policy that would create equitable conditions for all students.

A second issue is communication with the residents of ISD 199 about the successes we see in our system AND the rationale for asking for support in the form of a referendum this fall. When 80% of our residents don't have children in our schools, it can be a difficult ask when requesting more support. However, the truth is that people move into, and out of, districts based on the opportunities they provide for their students. I want ISD 199 to be local leaders with the opportunities we can provide to our students: high-caliber academics; safe, inclusive environments for social and emotional development; and practical, hands-on experiences with career opportunities. I support this by listening to district leaders and community members, asking questions during work sessions and in committee, and working with the rest of the board to broadly influence the direction of the district through our work as a governing body.



LIZ NIEMIOJA

Why do you want to serve on the ISD 199 School Board?

I love 199 and our Spartans. I've watched our district make some wonderful, positive changes over the years in some areas but struggle for progress in other areas. I want to use my experiences, skills, and connections with our teachers, staff, and families to help our board and our district make forward movement in every way. With the passage of the referendum on the ballot this fall, I'll follow through to help make these improvements a reality.

What experience do you bring to this position?

My training and experiences as an attorney help me look critically and constructively at issues that will face our board. My vast experiences as a volunteer and leader in our district, from multiple PTSAs/PTOs (president, vice president, and secretary roles), many advisory councils, boosters, in-class help, and event coordination, have given me a strong connection to, appreciation for, and understanding of issues facing our teachers, staff, students, and families. This is enhanced by my recent work as a substitute teacher.

Additionally, I've served in a variety of ways in our larger community, from the Inver Grove Heights Planning Commission (chair and vice chair roles), Dakota County Sheriff's advisory board, volunteering at Neighbors, Inc., and more. These groups have not only allowed me to work collaboratively, but they've kept me aware of many issues facing our town and our families. These experiences will help guide my choices with thoughtfulness and thoroughness before setting policy as a school board member.

What are the most important issues concerning the Inver Grove Heights School District and how would you address them?

I recognize the importance of the fact that issues facing our district can be different for every family or staff member. I see the challenges, ranging from teacher retention to closing the achievement gap. But for the purposes of my answer to this question, I would elevate improving the middle school experience and substance abuse coupled with mental health concerns as two of the most important issues facing our district.

We're simply not living up to our mission in the middle school, and therefore, we're not living up to our mission as a district. Though we've had a great teaching staff, the lack of electives and activities slows the growth of our students, and it puts them in a position of playing catch-up in high school as they try to figure out their passions and strengths later.

We, as a board, must communicate and gain as much feedback as possible from staff to make sure they have the tools and freedom to create a positive culture where all can thrive. We must maintain strong fiscal responsibility and be transparent with our citizens so they can trust that ISD 199 provides what it promises for our students in this upcoming referendum.

Substance abuse, from vaping to fentanyl, is a crisis in our community, and unfortunately, some of our kids aren't just succumbing to peer pressure, they're actually self-medicating for an unmet mental health need. Again, communicating with our staff and families about behaviors, changes, and concerns, in addition to providing the staff and resources for our kids to get the support they need, is a start to address the issue. But we should also throw a wide net to discover solutions, considering collaborations not just with our county but with other districts and organizations who are successful as they approach these challenges.

Candidates for Four-Year Seats (*Four vacancies*)



DARCIE PIERSON (*incumbent*)

Why do you want to serve on the ISD 199 School Board?

As an Inver Grove Heights community member and an ISD 199 parent of two enrolled students, I see this as an opportunity to give back and use my time and talents to make more sound policies and well-thought-out personnel decisions and to set the administrators up for success. I feel strongly that policies can be a powerful tool to enable administrators to improve the school environment and hold them accountable to provide a quality and equitable education to all students. I believe this is a critical time for public education, and the challenges that our teachers, administrators, and students face are substantial. These challenges require a school board that is listening to the community, committed to increasing safety in our schools, and purposeful in crafting policies that will support administrators, teachers, and students.

What experience do you bring to this position?

My applicable work experience is in human resources management, college-level course instruction (adjunct faculty), and leadership development. In my current role as a senior human resources business partner, I am well-versed in reviewing and crafting policies to ensure they create the desired outcome and avoid pitfalls that may not be intended or noticed when initially written. As an HR practitioner, I am a seasoned listener and have developed a strength in conflict resolution and mediation. My experience instructing college-level courses as well as serving in substitute paraprofessional roles has provided me an understanding of curriculum development and the challenges that educators face.

What are the most important issues concerning the Inver Grove Heights School District and how would you address them?

1) Teacher retention. – The increasing stressors on student-facing staff (teachers, counselors, etc.) and the ability to retain these employees must be a priority of the district and a focus when setting policies. It's important to remember that the school board position is one that sets policy and governance, and it is not operations management of the schools or the staff. With that said, I do believe there are ways our policies can support teachers and staff rather than limiting their ability to address issues. Some examples of policies that I see impacting teachers' ability to be empowered in the classroom are: student discipline, student attendance, and curriculum and instruction goals.

2) The mental health of our student body and the negative influence this is having on our ability to provide education during the school day. – Our teachers are pulled from educating and instructing in order to tend to crisis situations and behavioral outbursts at a higher rate than ever before. I believe this is a result and a symptom of an increasing mental health crisis in our country but specifically within our schools. To address this, I believe we need to continue to educate students on mental health, as we have been in the middle and high school levels, and to approve funding of mental health or behavioral staff at any opportunity we have.

Voting Options

Voting Absentee: September 22 - November 6

Absentee Balloting, also known as AB voting, began Friday, September 22. An absentee ballot is a vote cast early by mail or in person. Absentee ballots are then processed and tabulated on Election Day. Absentee Ballot Applications can be obtained through the ISD 199 District Office, 2990 80th Street East in Inver Grove Heights.



SHERRY WARRICK *(incumbent)*

Why do you want to serve on the ISD 199 School Board?

Over the past nine years, I have worked with wonderful leaders of our community who genuinely care for our students and staff. Currently, it is the same with great respect for each other and our opinions on the school board. The district leadership is hands-down some of the best educational leaders I have worked with. The environment they lead is one of encouragement, inclusion, and finding ways to better a system that is in need of updating. Our staff are dedicated to their students. I would like to continue to be part of this positive environment and help work on new ideas for our school district.

What experience do you bring to this position?

I have been an educator for 25 years in different grades, roles, and states. I've come to realize that what works in one district isn't what's right for another district. The needs are determined by the students, staff, and community. I listen to those needs as an educator and school board member, and I help make policy for our school district based on those needs.

As parents, my husband and I had first-hand experience with our three sons going through this school district. We are very happy with the experiences and opportunities they had. We appreciate the dedication of the staff to individualize their education.

What are the most important issues concerning the Inver Grove Heights School District and how would you address them?

1) Inclusion. – Regardless of race, gender, income level, religion, ethnicity, or gender identity, every student should feel welcomed, connected, and involved in our schools. There are many conversations going on now with our community and leadership. I commend them. Thank you. I will support programs and dialogue that will encourage all of our students to feel like they belong. We also want our kids to be engaged. We are learning that one size of education does not fit all. I support programs that individualize a student's education. Variability is the rule and not the exception. Thank you to our staff who encourage this belief. There are many of you!

2) Funding. – The Inver Grove Heights School District does a wonderful job of spending our funds efficiently. This year, State leaders decided to fund education at the level it should be and not make us play catch-up like we have been playing for the last 40 years. Education needs to be funded accurately. Teachers need to be paid more. I will support any opportunities to accurately fund our programs and employees.

3) Even more opportunities and pathways for students. – As our jobs are ever-changing and new jobs are being introduced, we need more classes for our students in coding, STEAM, language, and introductions to career pathways that students are considering. It is important that kids know a four-year college is not the right fit for all. Two-year trade schools can be a better fit for our students. We have several pathway courses currently. I will support any funding needed to bring in more teachers and classes to give our kids opportunities in what interests them.

Direct Balloting: October 20 - November 6

Direct balloting begins Friday, October 20. Direct balloting allows voters to insert their ballot directly into the tabulator, see it tabulated, and receive notification of any errors. Visit the ISD 199 District Office to cast a direct ballot.

Election Day Voting: November 7

Voters who choose to vote on Election Day are encouraged to visit www.pollfinder.sos.state.mn.us to find their polling place. Please be aware that precincts have changed since the last election.

Candidates for Two-Year Seat (*One vacancy*)



AARON BROOKSBY

Why do you want to serve on the ISD 199 School Board?

I am deeply committed to the future of education in our community because I believe in the transformative power of education. As a parent, attorney, and dedicated advocate, I believe in the power of a quality education to shape the lives of our students. I want to contribute my skills, passion, and experience to help shape policies that prioritize academic excellence, unity, and meaningful parent engagement to ensure that every child in ISD 199 has the opportunity to thrive and succeed. Together, we can create an environment where every student thrives and reaches their full potential. By serving on the school board, I aim to raise academic expectations, foster unity, and empower parents to create positive change for our schools.

What experience do you bring to this position?

I previously worked as a special education school bus driver in the South Washington County School District, which allowed me to interact closely with students and understand their daily challenges. I supervised and guided special needs children, honed my skills in conflict resolution, and ensured a safe and positive environment for them.

My role as a leader within my church's youth organization demonstrates my dedication to mentoring and guiding young individuals, ages 2-18. Over the years, I have had the privilege of shaping the experiences of young minds, emphasizing the importance of responsibility, respect, and community involvement. These experiences have deepened my understanding of the needs and aspirations of our youth, giving me a unique perspective to contribute to the school board's decisions.

My legal training equips me to interpret laws, regulations, and policies that impact our school district, ensuring that we make decisions that are not only in the best interest of the students but also aligned with legal standards.

Furthermore, my grasp of civics and governance principles allows me to appreciate the importance of transparency, accountability, and community engagement. I believe in the power of involving parents, teachers, and community members in the decision-making process. With my legal background, I can effectively communicate the reasoning behind policy choices and ensure they uphold the values of our district.

What are the most important issues concerning the Inver Grove Heights School District and how would you address them?

I believe the most pressing concerns within the Inver Grove Heights School District involve strengthening community trust and refocusing on academic excellence. To address these issues, I will prioritize strengthening the relationships between the district, parents, and the community. By fostering open communication and transparency, we can create an environment of trust and collaboration. Additionally, I firmly believe in redirecting our efforts toward enhancing academic programs to equip students with the skills needed for success in both education and life. Through community building and academic emphasis, we can restore confidence in the district's commitment to providing a high-quality education and nurturing the future success of our students.

MATT SCHAEFER (*incumbent*)

After thoughtful consideration, I am suspending my campaign for the ISD 199 Special Election for School Board. Due to recent unforeseen developments in my personal life, I am unable to give the time and dedication ISD 199 deserves past my current term that ends in December.



SHANA DUKES

Why do you want to serve on the ISD 199 School Board?

I believe that education is the foundation of a better society. As such, I am passionate about serving the community by becoming a member of the ISD 199 School Board. Having grown up in a small town in South Carolina that shares many similarities with Inver Grove Heights, I understand the importance of a strong and connected community. I am committed to being an example to all citizens that investing in the local school district is not just the responsibility of parents and students, but of everyone who wants to see the community thrive.

ISD 199 is a pillar of the Inver Grove Heights community, and I want to be the voice that represents the collective thoughts and concerns of all stakeholders in the district. My goal is to continue the great work that has been done before me while also bringing fresh ideas and perspectives to the table. I strongly believe in grounding my actions in the voice of the people and making sure that the needs of our students, teachers, and community members are always the top priority.

I am committed to making a positive impact on the lives of students, teachers, and the broader community. I believe that through collaboration, communication, and a commitment to excellence, we can create a brighter future for everyone in Inver Grove Heights.

What experience do you bring to this position?

With my work experience as a program coordinator and program director, as well as my eight years of military service, I have acquired valuable experience. My experience in these roles has included leading and managing teams as well as designing and implementing educational programs. I have gained a thorough understanding of the importance of effective communication, collaboration, and organization in achieving program objectives as a result of these experiences.

In addition to my experience in program coordination, I have also honed my skills in working with large data sets and conducting statistical analyses. I have created reports that synthesize complex data and present it clearly and concisely. I recognize the importance of data-driven decision-making and have worked hard to develop my skills in this area. Overall, I believe that my diverse experiences and skill set make me an ideal candidate for ISD 199.

What are the most important issues concerning the Inver Grove Heights School District and how would you address them?

As a candidate for the school board, one of my top priorities is to support teachers and staff by providing them with the necessary resources to offer the best possible education to students. I believe that by investing in our educators, we can ensure that our students receive the quality education they deserve.

Another critical issue that I am passionate about is closing the opportunity gap. It is no secret that our schools face significant challenges in this area, and I believe it is the responsibility of the school board to take action to address this issue. By providing support to all students, we can help them reach their full potential and ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed.

In addition to these priorities, I am committed to fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of their background. This means creating policies that promote diversity and inclusivity, providing resources to address issues such as bullying and harassment, and ensuring that all students feel valued and supported. By working together, we can create a school system that is truly inclusive and supportive of all students.

FUTURE READY



Referendum Information

ISD 199 voters will have the choice to approve two referendum questions on their November 7 ballot. The questions were a result of a year-long 199 Future Ready initiative that gathered the perspectives of students, families, community members, and staff on how the district could further prepare students for life after graduation. Approval of the questions would help the district implement the school community's goals, which center around expanding belonging, relationships, and engagement.

Belonging

Help students feel welcome and at ease in school so they can focus on learning.

- Enhance mental health support & school safety
- Maintain class sizes

Relationships

Increase professional development so teachers can build stronger relationships with students and empower them to be the agents of their own learning.

- Instructional support for teachers, such as learning partners

Engagement

Get kids excited to learn by expanding what we offer based on their interests.

- Extend world languages programming to elementary & middle school
- Add enhanced career exploration & opportunities for middle & high school students



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