

## Press Clippings 02-26-21

---Daily Herald--- 02/26/2021

### Dawn Martin: 2021 candidate, Elgin Area School District U-46



Dawn Martin

Four candidates are running for three, 4-year terms on the Elgin Area School District U-46 board.

#### **Bio**

**City:** Bartlett

**Age:** 44

**Occupation:** Stay-at-home parent

Civic involvement: Cookie Chair for Girl Scout Troop 1245, BHS Booster Rep for Boys Swimming, Treasurer for BHS Parent Advisory Committee, certified Administrative Official for Illinois Swimming, past volunteer at Centennial and Horizon Elementary Schools, board member and volunteer for Barracuda Swim team at Bartlett Park District

#### **Q&A**

**Q. Why are you running for this office, whether for reelection or election the first time? Is there a particular issue that motivates you, and if so, what is it?**

A. I have enjoyed volunteering within U46 throughout my children's education. This past year however families have had diminished access to educational and social-emotional supports due to the pandemic, leading to various struggles. Hearing these stories, and seeing them firsthand, has motivated me to volunteer on a larger scale. As a SD U46 board member, my first focus would be a safe and full reopening of our district in the fall. This includes assessing current educational impacts, working with teachers on supplemental learning opportunities, and reengaging students and their families through open dialogue and events. Other issues I look forward to being a part of include increasing district funding from the state; ensuring ongoing support of clubs, the arts, and athletics; ongoing review of curriculum for the Pathways/Magnet Academy rollout; review of gifted programming at middle and high schools; and working with our equity group to ensure all schools within our district are supported to best serve their students.

**Q. How would you grade the current school board on its response to the pandemic? Why?**

A. Following updated secondary grading policies of SD U46, I am giving our school board an "Incomplete" for their response to the pandemic to date. Early on, it seemed our board members were content to follow guidance being given by our administration without many questions or feedback. Though case rates were low in August, our district chose the most conservative plan forward and began in an all-remote learning format. Many emails sent to current board members regarding these plans were not responded to and families felt the needs of their students and their concerns were being ignored. It was not until a couple months into the school year that some board members started to speak up on the behalf of struggling students. At this time, it was becoming obvious to all that more students were disengaged from their education and failing grades were on the rise. Our school board has since voted to approve a move to a hybrid learning format. If our board continues to put students first, push for improved paths for all students to learn more effectively this semester, and improve communication with families their grade for the year could improve to a B-.

**Q. How do you view your role in confronting the pandemic: provide leadership even if unpopular, give a voice to constituents -- even ones with whom you disagree, or defer to state authorities?**

A. During the pandemic, and always as a school board member, I believe our role is listening to our families and students to ensure all needs are met. We are elected to be their voice when hearing district plans and when voting on any changes to district policies. It is now more obvious than ever that one plan does not work for all students. Education during the pandemic needs to be flexible and ensure that students are learning and thriving not merely surviving. This means providing resources to all students -- both those looking for remote learning and those ready to be back in classrooms. As a school board member, I will not back down from speaking up for what is in the best interest of students. Whether that is pushing for more time in classrooms, or the continuation of a full remote option next fall, I will listen to our families and fight for their children to have their educational needs met. Putting students first does not mean ignoring state guidance or the needs of teachers. Its understanding what the end goal needs to be and putting reasonable standards in place to get there.

**Q. Did your district continue to adequately serve students during the disruptions caused by the pandemic? If so, please cite an example of how it successfully adjusted to continue providing services. If not, please cite a specific example of what could have been done better.**

A. I believe SD U46 could have done a better job serving our students during the pandemic. The biggest example of this would be the disruption of services to our students with IEPs/504s. These students have plans that may include things like additional instructional hours to work on speech, personalized learning instruction, or occupational and physical therapy. Upon talking with families, it seems many of these services were either provided in an all-remote format or were delayed. These students were at the greatest risk of educational setbacks during this time and deserved to have their needs met in a better format. While these students were prioritized once SD U46 decided to begin limited in-person instruction, the additional losses incurred for these students could have been minimized by planning for an earlier reopening. As a district, we need to review the hours of in-person instruction and services these students lost and schedule additional resources now and over the summer to meet their needs going forward.

**Q. Do you have a plan on how to safely and effectively conduct classes in the spring? What have you learned from the fall semester that you would change in the spring?**

A. In SD U46 middle and high school students were in an all-remote format for the fall semester. Based on the increased rate of failing grades and conversations with many parents whose children are struggling both academically and emotionally, I would say this format was ineffective. Currently our district is using a hybrid format that includes a full day of "live" zoom, two half days of in-person instruction, two additional half days of zoom instruction and four half days of individual work time. This plan offers minimal in-person instruction, reduced "live" instruction time overall and a schedule that is difficult for many working families. For fourth quarter, I am looking for our district to move to an option that has students in-person five half days per week. Students who remain in remote learning would continue to have instruction by zoom in the afternoons. By this time, our staff will have been offered the chance at vaccination and ideally case rates continue to decline. Current policies such as masking and avoiding lunch and snack time in the buildings would continue. In some cases, individual schools may need to look at where classes are held to follow updated spacing guidance.

**Q. What is your position on allowing high school sports to continue during the pandemic? Be specific.**

A. Last March, students left their schools, activities and friends thinking in a few weeks they would be back to what they have known. Those weeks turned into months of isolation, lack of social-emotional supports and hours upon hours of time spent staring at a screen trying to stay focused enough to learn. In SD U46, fall did not bring back a sense of normalcy for most of our students. For many of these kids, their activities such as sports, theater and band were how they coped with the stresses of school, growing up and life around them. I believe reintroducing these activities to our students will allow them to better handle the ongoing changes due to COVID and support their continued growth into well-rounded adults. Various athletic organizations at the state and national levels have introduced plans to reduce the risk of COVID during events. Sports were never a risk-free endeavor, however the benefit to our students' long-term health and development should be considered. I have seen firsthand how having access to athletics can benefit our kids and I support athletics and the arts continuing at this time.

**Veronica Noland: 2021 candidate, Elgin Area School District U-46**



Veronica Noland

Four candidates are running for three, 4-year terms on the Elgin Area School District U-46 board.

**Bio**

**City:** Elgin

**Age:** 54

**Occupation:** Consultant

**Employer:** Self-employed

**Civic involvement:** U-46 school board member 2013-present; active in First Congregational Church of Elgin

## Q&A

**Q. Why are you running for this office, whether for reelection or election the first time? Is there a particular issue that motivates you, and if so, what is it?**

A. I started in 2013 as a frustrated parent, and knew I would need a seat at the table in order to affect change. Fast forward to 2021, and I am running to continue to advocate from a parent's perspective. I'm particularly interested in issues related to equity and the achievement gap, and specialized student services, especially as they affect our most marginalized families. These concerns have been magnified with the current pandemic.

**Q. How would you grade the current school board on its response to the pandemic? Why?**

A. The Board has been keenly aware of the disparate opinions in the community related to the opening of schools during the pandemic. For the past 11 months we have closely monitored the district's response as it has evolved, along with the guidance from the various authorities. One area that I believe has been lacking is in clarifying for the public the many complexities that have informed our decisions. For that I would grade us as needing improvement.

**Q. How do you view your role in confronting the pandemic: provide leadership even if unpopular, give a voice to constituents -- even ones with whom you disagree, or defer to state authorities?**

A. I believe our role is a combination of all three. U-46 is a large urban district with a broad constituency, and providing leadership is often unpopular even without a pandemic. As a board member, I do give voice to constituents even when we disagree, take the counsel of state authorities as available, and then use my vote to make the best decision possible.

**Q. Did your district continue to adequately serve students during the disruptions caused by the pandemic? If so, please cite an example of how it successfully adjusted to continue providing services. If not, please cite a specific example of what could have been done better.**

A. U-46 was a leader in its pandemic response by immediately shifting gears to ensure no child went hungry due to the school closures. In addition, the district moved quickly to ensure all families had access to a device for online learning, and negotiated broadband arrangements for some families.

**Q. Do you have a plan on how to safely and effectively conduct classes in the spring? What have you learned from the fall semester that you would change in the spring?**

A. U-46 is currently providing both a hybrid model and a fully remote option for families. We learned that providing both in person and remote instruction simultaneously is not effective, which is why the current hybrid model separates them out. The downside is the decrease in instructional time. In order to get back to full in person instruction we need to get as many employees vaccinated as quickly as possible, which is why the district worked with health authorities to secure thousands of doses of the vaccine for it's employees.

**Q. What is your position on allowing high school sports to continue during the pandemic? Be specific.**

A. Some high school sports lend themselves more easily than others to resuming during a pandemic. We could consider incorporating some type of COVID testing protocol in order to resume the highest contact sports.

## **Melissa Owens: 2021 candidate, Elgin Area School District U-46**



Melissa Owens

Four candidates are running for three, 4-year terms on the Elgin Area School District U-46 board.

### **Bio**

**City:** Bartlett

**Age:** 52

**Occupation:** Coordinator of volunteer program at Community Crisis Center in Elgin

**Civic involvement:** District U-46 Educational Foundation board; planning committee for the Basket Brigade of Suburban Chicago; habitat restoration project volunteer in Kane and Cook counties; past chair of U-46 Community Advisory Council and the Specialized Services subcommittee, the Alignment Collaborative for Education Operating Board; various fundraising, steering, and planning committees, including the Elgin CROP Hunger Walk and the Spring Benefit Auction for the Community Crisis Center.

### **Q&A**

**Q. Why are you running for this office, whether for reelection or election the first time? Is there a particular issue that motivates you, and if so, what is it?**

A. Four years ago, I sought election to the Board of Education because of my belief that public schools are the foundation of our community. I wanted to play a role in making sure School District U-46 serves our students and families well. I still believe in the importance of a robust public school system. I am proud of our accomplishments over the past four years, including increasing the number of social workers, counselors, and mental health supports in our buildings; bringing one-to-one technology to all students -- a process that was in place even before the pandemic; strengthening our career-readiness programs; and protecting local taxpayers by abating tax dollars toward our long-term debt. Looking forward to the next four years, the school board has numerous challenges to address. Many facilities are aging, and imbalances in capacity utilization exist across the district. We have service gaps resulting from the pandemic, and we are likely facing renewed funding constraints at the state level. The school board also needs to realign our strategic plan goals to set up our students for future success. I welcome these challenges and respectfully ask for the opportunity to continue serving our community's residents.

**Q. How would you grade the current school board on its response to the pandemic? Why?**

A. I would give our Board a "B" grade on our pandemic response. There are certain things that we could have done better. We struggled to maintain a sense of connection between our staff, our community, and ourselves -- not dissimilar to what many people have experienced during the pandemic. We lost focus on the priorities we set before the pandemic. And despite our best intentions, we were not always as responsive as we could have been and should have been to some parts of our community. That said, board members agreed very early on to a clearly defined communication and authority protocol, which allowed the administration to focus on operations and act as necessary. The protocol also allowed board members to streamline feedback from the community back to the administration. We advocated for developing a comprehensive back-to-school plan that prioritized safety and the delivery of critical services. Board members supported each other by engaging in pandemic-related learning sessions and sharing information. We also collectively recognize where we have struggled, particularly in being responsive to the community, which is something to work on in the future.

**Q. How do you view your role in confronting the pandemic: provide leadership even if unpopular, give a voice to constituents -- even ones with whom you disagree, or defer to state authorities?**

A. Seeking out information regarding all aspects of COVID-19; keeping abreast of local, regional, and statewide pandemic developments; attending webinars and other learning sessions offered by education-focused legal firms and the Illinois Association of School Boards; monitoring issues within the district concerning student instruction and service delivery; listening to community members, including parents, staff members, and students; and advocating for their concerns have been my primary focus as a school board member during the pandemic. Like other school districts, we received an unprecedented amount of feedback whenever we decided on a change to our instructional model. My practice has been to consult with our Board President regarding those concerns regularly. Also, I track concerns raised to board members and ask for clarification on those concerns publicly at board meetings, whether or not they mirror my concerns. I know that I have been far from perfect in responding to every concern raised. Still, I do try to offer clarification and additional resources on issues as much as possible.

If reelected, I will continue to listen and consider differing viewpoints and work toward decisions that reflect the community's best interest as a whole.

**Q. Did your district continue to adequately serve students during the disruptions caused by the pandemic? If so, please cite an example of how it successfully adjusted to continue providing services. If not, please cite a specific example of what could have been done better.**

A. At the start of the pandemic, the district rapidly pushed needed technology out to families and worked on connectivity issues. Our teachers did a remarkable job of getting up to speed on our new learning platform and re-imagining curriculum delivery in a completely different medium. Also, I am thankful that our focus has always been to deliver U-46 curriculum by U-46 teachers, whether a student is in our hybrid or remote program, rather than relying on a third-party company to provide remote instruction so that all students have access to the same instruction. It remains true, though, that curriculum and instruction written with an in-person model in mind do not always translate well to remote instruction and that forming relationships -- so integral to learning -- is very difficult remotely. Some parents have shared stories of how much their child is thriving with the change to remote learning. However, we know that other students are struggling, some of them for the first time in their educational careers. We might have alleviated some of those struggles if we had put more effort into getting some students in for one-on-one help.

**Q. Do you have a plan on how to safely and effectively conduct classes in the spring? What have you learned from the fall semester that you would change in the spring?**

A. It is important to note that, while it is the Board's job to set expectations and monitor instruction effectiveness, it is the administration's job to determine how best to conduct that instruction safely. Aside from a pivot back to remote learning when COVID numbers spiked late in the fall and a slightly delayed second-semester schedule, the district has mostly been able to adhere to the plan the administration presented to the Board last July. Like many other school districts, most of our students attend a two-day hybrid schedule, or they remain fully remote by choice. Our brief return in the fall did demonstrate where we had some gaps in protocols, allowing the administration to prioritize those protocols for the second semester. One take-away from the fall is the importance of flexibility to meet specialized needs across the system. Should the course of the pandemic cause us to retract at any point this spring, I will advocate for flexible and innovative ways to address instructional needs that are very difficult to meet remotely.

**Q. What is your position on allowing high school sports to continue during the pandemic? Be specific.**

A. There is no question that athletics is an essential part of high school. The cessation of sports activities has been a massive disappointment for many students. However, I agree with the Illinois State Board of Education that, for the safety of everyone involved with education, priority necessarily goes to instructional needs. It was disappointing that ISBE and the IHSA were at odds during the fall season with their guidance, particularly concerning high-risk sports safety. I am now encouraged to have a solid framework for athletic participation in place with pandemic metrics for sports in all risk categories. I fully support allowing our students the opportunity to participate in athletics in conjunction with the new guidance, as long as participation does not impact our ability to continue our instructional model safely. I will also add that other extracurricular activities are just as important as athletics, including visual and

musical arts, theater, and special-interest clubs; I support the continuance of all of these programs with the same prioritization of safety in mind.

## **LeJewel Crigler: 2021 candidate, Elgin Area School District U-46**



LeJewel Crigler

Four candidates are running for three, 4-year terms on the Elgin Area School District U-46 board.

### **Bio**

**City:** Elgin

**Age:** 55

**Occupation:** Domestic engineer

**Civic involvement:** Various civil rights and political organizations; volunteer for Girl Scouts of Northern Illinois

### **Q&A**

**Q. Why are you running for this office, whether for reelection or election the first time? Is there a particular issue that motivates you, and if so, what is it?**

A. I believe there needs to be more diversity on the school board. Well meaning, in not just race, but unique backgrounds. I've had one child that completed school here in U-46, my other, as a family we chose to home-school her.

I've seen how a child can thrive, when the atmosphere allows for all doors of opportunity to be open. I want as many children as possible to experience what my daughter has. This is what motivates, and gives me hope that regardless of all of the adjustments that we have all had to make; there's no greater time than now to go full speed ahead in putting measures in place to ensure such successful outcomes.

**Q. How would you grade the current school board on its response to the pandemic? Why?**

A. It's a non-arguable fact that pandemic took a toll on everyone. For the American people specifically, this was something totally out of the ordinary. For the most part, I believe that all



school districts, as well as ours, have been doing their best to keep everyone safe. What it showed me is that more so now than ever before, how important each person is. How collectively we all came together as one people, the American people, and helped each other.

**Q. How do you view your role in confronting the pandemic: provide leadership even if unpopular, give a voice to constituents -- even ones with whom you disagree, or defer to state authorities?**

A. I received many inquiries regarding home-school, also requests for supplemental materials to better assist the children and their families. This led me to put on workshops to provide such materials. Remembering my mantra, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, lemon cake, etc." Some of the best things are borne out of challenges.

**Q. Did your district continue to adequately serve students during the disruptions caused by the pandemic? If so, please cite an example of how it successfully adjusted to continue providing services. If not, please cite a specific example of what could have been done better.**

A. Speaking with quite a few parents, as well as the children. There were frustrations with the district's computer program that was being used. In this age that we're in, some of these problems can be expected. Though this was such a large scale operation that needed to be done, in such a short period of time. I believe we all know more than a few adjustments will be needed further down the line. Not to be ready for another pandemic, but procedures and programs implemented that would be fine tuned and established. Making issues like this void.

**Q. Do you have a plan on how to safely and effectively conduct classes in the spring? What have you learned from the fall semester that you would change in the spring?**

A. Currently the US is taking most direction from the CDC. With the push for teachers to be vaccinated. All is slowly on course to get everyone safely back into the schools on a weekly basis. If we stay the course, I believe for the most part, life will then start to seem normal.

**Q. What is your position on allowing high school sports to continue during the pandemic? Be specific.**

A. As long as all precautions were taken, and the students' parents were in agreement. I agreed.

## **U-46 Community Advisory Council to host candidate forum March 4**

**Submitted by Elgin Area School District U-46**

On Thursday, March 4, Elgin Area School District's Community Advisory Council will host a virtual forum where the public can learn more about the school board candidates in the April 6 Consolidated Election.

"We have all seen firsthand what an important role our board of education members play when tough, complex decisions have to be made for our district," said CAC Chairperson Larry Bury. "We're proud that we will once again host an event that will allow members of our U-46 community to learn more about the candidates and their positions on the variety of issues that impact our schools and students."

The board of education is responsible for determining the policies which guide the operation of U-46. Elected members serve four-year terms and are not paid for their services. It is a non-partisan position.

The U-46 board has seven members, along with a non-voting student advisor. In the election on April 6, voters in U-46 will choose up to three candidates on their ballots for the the board. The top three vote-getters will be elected.

Four candidates filed in December to run for a seat. They are Dawn Martin of Bartlett; incumbent Veronica Noland of Elgin; incumbent Melissa Owens of Bartlett; and LeJewel Crigler of Elgin.

The CAC's School Board Candidate Forum will start at 7 p.m Thursday, March 4, via Zoom.

The moderator will be Madhu Krishnamurthy, a senior staff writer and education writer for the Daily Herald.

Those interested in attending can register at [bit.ly/CAC-Forum](https://bit.ly/CAC-Forum). It is open to all, and Spanish language translation will be available.