

## Solon school board candidates answer five questions

### ELECTION 2021

#### Cleo Krejci

Iowa City Press-Citizen | USA TODAY NETWORK

Seven candidates are running for the Solon school board this election — competing for three seats.

Two candidates are current board members running for another term: Tim Brown, the current president, and Dan Coons. Both declined to answer a questionnaire sent by the Press-Citizen to all candidates.

Five new candidates are also in the mix: Erika Billerbeck, Kelly Edmonds, Stacey Munson, Michael Neuerburg and Cassie Rochholz.

The Solon Economist is hosting a forum with the candidates from 6:30-8 p.m. on Oct. 20 at the Solon Center for the Arts.

The election will take place Nov. 2.

The Press-Citizen sent five questions to each of the candidates and asked them to respond in 150 words or less, giving them six days to do so. Answers above the word limit were condensed for wordiness.

Below are answers for each of the four candidates who replied.

#### Erika Billerbeck

1. School board members are elected to represent students who attend school in Solon, their families and other members of the school community. At a time when political division is prevalent not only in the U.S., but in Iowa and local communities, how would you be an advocate for all community members, even if you disagree with their viewpoints?

As a member of the school board, I anticipate the need to find a balance among the diverse needs of the student body, faculty priorities, administrative ideas, and community interests. However, this concept is challenging in Solon because, from my perspective, much of the current board policy actu-

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#### School

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ally discourages members from engaging in the type of representation described in the first sentence of this question. I intend to depart from current practices and actively work to establish respectful discourse between all factions of the school community. One step in achieving this is to acknowledge that even though people may seem to maintain diametrically opposing positions, they share a common goal: to do the right thing for the school district. As a state peace officer, I have 21 years' worth of experience resolving conflict. I understand the importance of problemsolving, accountability, listening, de-

*on HF 802, and the teachings of topics like racism in the modern day?*

My understanding is that HF 802 limits how government entities educate or train on racism and diversity and inclusion, basically not allowing educators to teach students that one race is inherently oppressive, or that the U.S. is systemically racist. I am not an expert on racism, sexism, or oppression. However, there is much to be gained by allowing teachers to teach the truth about history in a straight forward manner. It is time this country steps up and takes responsibility for our own history because until it is faced, it cannot be overcome. Attempting to sweep history under the rug will only perpetuate the pain for everyone. If you want to gratify your

escalating situations, and approaching issues from more than one perspective 2. Please tell voters what you think about in-school mask requirements. Should Solon Community School District implement one? Why or why not?

The recent substantial outbreak of positive Covid-19 cases in Solon schools was clear evidence that our lack of mitigation strategies was less than ideal. As a result, a significant percentage of our student body was out of school, parents were forced to miss work, and family life was disrupted. The abundant, prevailing data regarding the benefits of wearing masks informs us that Solon's outbreak was largely preventable. At a minimum, I believe that we should require masks for students who aren't old enough to be vaccinated or for students who aren't vaccinated. (Obviously, students who have health or learning issues that are compromised by wearing a mask would be exempt.) In considering this issue, I think it's important to remember that a school is only one part of a larger community. It is the school's responsibility to do what it can to protect the most vulnerable in our community.

3. As a member of the school board, you would be responsible for overseeing the school district's operations — including its essential duty to educate students. Do you have prior experience that shapes your view on education? Are there any educational tools or opportunities you think Solon CSD should explore?

I grew up in a family of educators — my mom was an art teacher and my dad was a school principal. My decision to run for the school board was influenced by my upbringing which always placed an emphasis on education. I was raised to be an open-minded critical thinker, and to serve my community. I've also served on the board of a preschool in Iowa City.

With my background as a conservation officer, I would like to see Solon schools become a leader in environmental education. For several years, I've provided an after-school program for Solon students called "Wild Things" which provides students environmental education by way of exploring local natural areas. It was well-received and much needed. A first step toward achieving the goal of becoming a leader in outdoor education would be to take advantage of our proximity to the University of Iowa's "School of the Wild."

teachers, say that you trust them to teach difficult topics in the best way possible so that these complex social issues can be understood.

5. Please tell voters what your top three priorities would be as a member of the school board and how you chose them.

1. Safety of our Students, Staff, and Community: Following guidelines established by experts is paramount to keeping staff, students, and the community safe. I believe that safety includes not only physical safety, but also psychological safety. Psychological safety is essential to creating a culture of trust, innovation, and productivity.
2. Fiscal Responsibility and Transparency: Fiscal responsibility is essential to creating a stronger and more prosperous district; not only for our current students, staff, and taxpayers, but also for those in the future. It is time to invest in our district while living within our means and passing along sustainable policy.
3. Ensure our Students are Prepared for Future Success: We must teach our students to be critical thinkers so that they can improve the world. If elected, I will strive to ensure that fundamental learning lays the groundwork for each student's current and future success as inheritors of this earth.

### **Stacey Munson**

1. School board members are elected to represent students who attend school in Solon, their families and other members of the school community. At a time when political division is prevalent not only in the U.S., but in Iowa and local communities, how would you be an advocate for all community members, even if you disagree with their viewpoints?

As a school board member, I understand that it would be both my privilege and responsibility to represent my entire community. While every school board member has his or her own opinions on certain topics, it is important to gather information from across the community to truly understand others' viewpoints and concerns. I am an openminded person who is willing and able to listen to others and seek to understand their viewpoint. Serving as an advocate for the community is a serious responsibility, and one that I would be honored to fulfill.

4. The state Legislature passed House File 802 ahead of this academic year, raising questions on the state level about how topics like racism and slavery should be handled in the classroom. What is your position on HF 802, and the teachings of topics like racism in the modern day?

Personally, I think it is unfortunate that our state legislature opted to pass HF 802. There is a lot of ambiguity embedded in the law. It is causing confusion and stress for educators who fear they will somehow be in violation of the law merely by teaching facts. Most people have had the experience of being presented with information that is less than fully truthful. The experience can leave us feeling skeptical, disappointed, and mistrustful of the person or entity that perpetrated the half-truth. I believe teachers should be able to teach all subject matter in a truthful, straightforward manner. Our educational system should not tolerate anything less than the truth, even when it is uncomfortable or difficult.

5. Please tell voters what your top three priorities would be as a member of the school board and how you chose them.

1. Improve teacher morale and retention: A number of talented, experienced teachers have left our district as a direct result of a toxic environment and disrespectful treatment they've been subjected to. These problems have been exacerbated by an apparent lack of response by the school board. Numerous current and past teachers reached out to me to express their frustrations with the current board and superintendent, prompting me to make this one of my priorities.

2. Improve communication: The prevalence of inadequate, untrustworthy and sometimes completely lacking communication from leadership down to teachers, staff, parents, and students is a source of frustration to me personally as a parent and community member. I am quite aware that others share my frustration.

3. Improve accountability: Currently, SCSD leadership avoids being held accountable when issues arise. This may be due to the present policy that discourages members from performing their due diligence in terms of oversight.

**Tim Brown**

2. Please tell voters what you think about in-school mask requirements. Should Solon Community School District implement one? Why or why not?

In order to limit the spread of COVID-19 there are a variety of mitigation efforts that can be utilized, some of which are already in place. Prior to implementing a mask mandate in our schools, I believe that significantly more efforts could be taken to strongly encourage masking among students and staff, and additional efforts could be taken to maximize social distancing and reduce potential transmission among students and staff. While not ideal, I would support a mask mandate with defined metrics around when required and when no longer required if it were determined that this measure was necessary to keep our students in the classroom receiving in-person instruction. We have a responsibility to keep our students and staff safe. This includes providing an environment where potential risks have been assessed and appropriate safeguards put in place to mitigate risk.

3. As a member of the school board, you would be responsible for overseeing the school district's operations — including its essential duty to educate students. Do you have prior experience that shapes your view on education? Are there any educational tools or opportunities you think Solon CSD should explore?

I am a 2001 graduate of Solon High School, the daughter of a retired educator, and my husband is an educator at Solon High School; thus I have lived my entire life listening to educators talk about what they do and why they do it. My three children attend school in the district. These experiences as well as my professional experience working in healthcare management have helped me to be uniquely poised to understand our school district from a variety of viewpoints as well as to have the necessary financial and analytical skills to successfully function as a school board member.

Solon must continue to evaluate and challenge the status quo regarding the classes and programs that are offered. This may include further evaluation of services such as TAG programs, elective courses at the high school level, and careful consideration of advanced placement courses and collaborative relationships with local colleges and universities.

Brown is the current president of the Solon school board. Via email, he said there have been more requests for questionnaire responses this election cycle than in the past and he did not “have time to meet the timelines for the ones that came in more recently and have had short turnarounds.”

More information: <https://www.solon.k12.ia.us/page/members>

### **Dan Coons**

Coons is a current member of the Solon school board. Via email, he said: “I will respectfully decline your request. I will be answering questions in the Solon Economist and we will be scheduling a candidate forum in Solon.”

More information: <https://www.solon.k12.ia.us/page/members>

### **Kelly Edmonds**

1. School board members are elected to represent students who attend school in Solon, their families and other members of the school community. At a time when political division is prevalent not only in the U.S., but in Iowa and local communities, how would you be an advocate for all community members, even if you disagree with their viewpoints? A public school board is a non-partisan body and political discussion should be avoided. However, a noticeable issue with our current board is the lack of addressing parents’ questions and concerns, holding discussion on issues, and overall transparency in general. Given the community division, my first priority would be to listen to all student, parent and teacher/ staff concerns and review the issues in an open discussion versus closed door decision making. We may not all be able to agree on individual issues or solutions but being transparent with board decisions will go a long way towards uniting our community. I am confident that all those in our community can understand policy decisions that are based on the best interest of students, teachers and staff.

2. Please tell voters what you think about in-school mask requirements. Should Solon Community School District implement one? Why or why not?

My position on the wellbeing of our students, staff,

4. The state Legislature passed House File 802 ahead of this academic year, raising questions on the state level about how topics like racism and slavery should be handled in the classroom. What is your position on HF 802, and the teachings of topics like racism in the modern day?

It is vital that we foster and demand an educational environment where all students are treated with equity and respect. I want to discuss this with our local educators to understand how HF 802 has affected their curriculum. HF 802 should not affect Solon Community School District’s commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equity.

5. Please tell voters what your top three priorities would be as a member of the school board and how you chose them.

1. Increasing transparency and communication between the school board and community. This includes holding school board meetings in a larger space that is more welcoming for parents, students, and community members to attend.

2. A deeper evaluation of vacant positions that have not been filled is in order. Over the past several years there have been several positions that have been vacated and left unfilled. I would like to explore why this has occurred, what classes or services are no longer offered because of these vacancies, and the fiscal impact of these vacancies. In addition, discussing and understanding the potential barriers to reinstating these positions would be an essential component of this evaluation.

3. Understanding past and current spending practices, why these practices have continued, and discussion among administration and board members about if these practices should continue; namely discussion around any percentage of the authorized budget that is left unspent.

### **Michael Neuerburg**

1. School board members are elected to represent students who attend school in Solon, their families and other members of the school community. At a time when political division is prevalent not only in the U.S., but in Iowa and local communities, how would you be an advocate for all community members, even if you disagree with their viewpoints?

and teachers is to follow evidence-based science and follow expert and non-politically motivated guidance. Given the recommendation by the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics indicating that masking in schools greatly reduces COVID-19 transmission, I am in favor of a mask mandate, at least until vaccines are available for all school-aged children. A lot of parents want a choice in whether to send their children to school in a mask, however in a public school, parent choice is not always feasible. A pandemic is one of the times when public schools must step in do what is best for the health of all students and staff. It is my hope that by the time the new board members take office, vaccines will be available for all school-aged children and masking will not be such a debatable topic.

3. As a member of the school board, you would be responsible for overseeing the school district's operations — including its essential duty to educate students. Do you have prior experience that shapes your view on education? Are there any educational tools or opportunities you think Solon CSD should explore?

My experience is in business and construction management and my strength is realizing that a good leader will listen to the experts. In the case of education, I would listen to teachers and other education experts. In talking with educators in Solon, I have heard that some evidence-based educational methods are not being implemented correctly, thus undermining their fidelity. I also plan on looking at the data available to find where there might be gaps for students from diverse backgrounds or with independent educational plans and compare Solon's data to other districts across the state and nation. I then will discuss idea with the experts, our educators

*4. The state Legislature passed House File 802 ahead of this academic year, raising questions on the state level about how topics like racism and slavery should be handled in the classroom. What is your position*

I will listen respectfully and openly to everyone teachers, students, parents, administration and anyone else in the community. Political division is prevalent, but school boards are nonpartisan. We work to help the school help our students. In any disagreement, regardless of any political aspect, I seek to understand not just what people want but why they want it. In my experience, finding common goals makes compromise much more achievable on steps toward those goals. Whether divisions can be overcome or not, community members should know I'm listening to them and working in good faith to improve our district.

2. Please tell voters what you think about in-school mask requirements. Should Solon Community School District implement one? Why or why not?

This is a tremendous point of division, and the community deserves a

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**Billerbeck**



**Edmonds**



**Munson**



**Neuerburg**

straight answer. Yes, I believe Solon CSD should implement a mask requirement consistent with public health guidance from the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics. We have lived with COVID for 18 months now. We have learned — from our own experience and from the research that has been done around the world — about how COVID spreads and how to prevent its spread. The mask requirement Solon had last year worked. Student achievement was good and student cases were lower. Now, without a mandate, we have seen a spike in cases. At the time I write this, Solon CSD had 67 confirmed positive student cases in just one week. This affects the many many students who must quarantine and miss school, it affects the parents who must scramble to provide child care, and it creates more risk for further spread in our community. We have also seen the COVID situation change rapidly based on vaccine availability to different groups, local case rates, and the rise of new variants. The school board needs to be responsive to these changes and I would consider all the information available at the time such a vote would come up.

3. As a member of the school board, you would be responsible for overseeing the school district's operations

— including its essential duty to educate students. Do you have prior experience that shapes your view on education? Are there any educational tools or opportunities you think Solon CSD should explore?

Solon has fantastic teachers but has a problem retaining those teachers. My daughter is in the fourth grade and I have been deeply impressed by her teachers. But two of her four K-3 teachers are no longer with the district.

I had the opportunity to be a TA and tutor in math, physics, and fluid mechanics for several years in college. I would not compare that to the experience of our K-12 teachers, but it taught me that every student has individual needs. This takes tremendous time and effort, and our teachers are already stretched thin. I would like to see Solon expand its TAG/ELP program and the work it has done with special education and provide more help to classroom teachers when it comes

to meeting individual needs — whether that's in the form of open communication to connect students with resources, or further supporting teachers so they have more time to devote to their students.

4. The state Legislature passed House File 802 ahead of this academic year, raising questions on the state level about how topics like racism and slavery should be handled in the classroom. What is your position on HF 802, and the teachings of topics like racism in the modern day?

HF 802 is vague and poorly defined to the point of self-contradiction. The state should not be trying to use a blunt instrument to direct how our schools teach, especially when it comes to important and sensitive topics like slavery and racism. Our country's history has good parts and bad, and our schools must teach both good and bad so our students get the full and honest education they deserve.

5. Please tell voters what your top three priorities would be as a member of the school board and how you chose them.

My top three priorities are to reduce teacher turnover, expand Solon's programs for students with specific needs, and improve school board communication so that the board can be more responsive to the needs of students, parents, teachers, and community members. I have listened to many parents and teachers talk about their experiences with the school district. There is great love for Solon schools and teachers, but I have also heard too many of the same concerns — that we are losing our experienced teachers, that some students aren't getting the resources that would help them, and that the board is not responsive to the community. I share the love for Solon schools, and as a board member I want to make things even better.

### **Cassie Rochholz**

Rochholz did not respond to the candidate questionnaire.

Information about her campaign can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100055956696963> *Cleo Krejci covers education for the Iowa City Press-Citizen. You can reach her at [ckrejci@press-citizen.com](mailto:ckrejci@press-citizen.com) or on Twitter via @\_CleoKrejci.*

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