



Questions for Candidates for School Board Trustee from the Conservative Coalition of Harris County

This questionnaire will be posted onto the Conservative Coalition of Harris County website for public viewing (www.cchc-pac.org).

Candidate Name	Position that Candidate is Running For
John E. McStravick	Tomball ISD, Position 3

Candidates please give your answer to each of the following questions and include your rationale with each answer. Please be concise and clear.

1. Why are you running for School Board Trustee? Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve on the school board? If elected, what will be your priorities?

Answer: I am running for reelection as a Tomball ISD trustee for our students and my community. As a graduate of THS, and father of Tomball ISD graduates, I have a love and passion for this community and Tomball ISD. I want to ensure Tomball ISD continues the high standards of student achievement, community values and conservative fiscal management. My priorities, if reelected, will be the successful completion of Bond 2021 and continuous improvement for our students in academic success and college/career/military readiness, all in a fiscally sound manner while enhancing the safe and secure learning environment of all campuses and facilities.
2. Are you running with any organized slate of candidates? Have you received any donations or endorsements from any group(s)? If so, which groups? How will you promote your school board candidacy?

Answer: While I am conducting a separate campaign, I am combining many efforts (e.g., website, signage, door hangers) with the other incumbents in the race – Michael Pratt (Pos. 2) and Mark Lewandowski (Pos. 4). As of this writing, while I have received the endorsement of many individuals within the district, State Rep. Sam Harless, and past and present Republican Precinct Chairs, I have not received any donations or endorsements from any groups. I am promoting my reelection efforts via social media, website, signage, emails, small gatherings, door hangers, public events and word of mouth.

3. What experience or skills have prepared you to serve as a board member? In what school district or community activities/organizations have you been involved? What differentiates you from the other candidates and/or board members?

Answer: I have lived in this community for over 38 years. I am a product of this community and of Tomball High School. I am the father of three children who attended many different schools in this district and graduated from Tomball High School. I have been an active supporter within the schools and this community for over 24 years, as a member/volunteer for school and church related booster clubs, organizations and events, including being a dedicated buyer at the Tomball FFA Project Show and Sale all that time. Many of my (law) clients are residents within this community. As a professional engineer, lawyer, former CEO of a natural gas storage/trading company and member of the governing board of subsidiaries of international publicly traded companies, I have experience in resolving difficult and complex issues, balancing outcomes, resolving employee matters, attending to growth, balancing and cutting budgets, making sound financial decisions, and working with others in a team approach to accomplish the ultimate object. Also, I have served as a trustee on the Tomball ISD school board for 22 years, so am very familiar with the challenges affecting Tomball ISD and those associated with being a public-school trustee in Texas. What differentiates me from my opponents is my love, dedication and commitment to my community, of which I am a product, my expressed desire for continued improvement in student success and my years of business/legal experience and leadership both in corporate matters as well as within Tomball ISD. In respect of my fellow current board members, the differences in my background, as opposed to theirs, and the similarities I share with some, provides a synergy that allows us to consider many different facets of issues presented to us so that we can develop a consensus resolution informed by Tomball ISD's mission statement that was collaboratively developed by the community and Board about 5 years ago.

4. What issues do you believe your district needs to address in its academic program and offerings? What changes would you recommend?

Answer: Tomball ISD is a Straight "A" rated district (2019 and 2022) and is the highest academically rated district in both Harris and Montgomery Counties. I want to ensure the district continues the high standards of student achievement. Additionally, I want to ensure continuous improvement for our students in college/career/military readiness. Moreover, I want to continue to enhance the options we provide our students. In addition to the traditional high school path, over my tenure on the board, we have added additional dual credit and AP courses (college prep and reduces cost of college) as well as non-traditional/credit recover program (an alternative to GED) and, during the last 5 years, added an early college high school (students graduate in 4 years with both a high school diploma and associates degree at no cost), approval is pending for a P-TECH in health care (again, student graduates in 4 years with both a high school diploma and associates degree at no cost, plus one or more industry certifications in the medical field), now have 28 Career and Technology pathways with over 30 industry certifications available. I want to further enhance and expand these options/offerings, to provide additional CTE pathways and certifications, while expanding dual credit and AP courses and early college high school offerings. By doing this, our students will have more (low or no cost) options whether they are college, career or military bound, or any combination thereof. As a trustee, I committed to this by approving the purchase of the 70+ acre BJ Services world headquarters located within the district at 10 cents on the dollar (purchased out of bankruptcy), which will allow Tomball ISD to provide many more CTE offerings in a very cost-effective manner. We have also introduced a new program, two-way dual language, at the elementary level, which has been shown to improve student success throughout their entire educational experience and beyond. Bottom line: I will work to encourage/support the Superintendent to enhance and enlarge our current academic programs and offerings as set out in our (community developed) Strategic Plan 2025.

5. What is the proper role of TASA and TASB with respect to independent school boards? Do you believe there should be mask or vaccine mandates in public school? Where should these mandates originate, if at all?

Answer: TASA and TASB are resources for the school districts. They both provide a means for their members to acquire state mandated continuing education. TASB, in particular, provides school districts with economy of scale that allows a district a to more cost effectively acquire goods and services. Tomball ISD does not use either organization for advocacy, as our challenges, being within the largest 100 districts in the state, are not the same as the other 1000 or so other members. We work to foster our own relationship with our local legislators, who represent the same constituents.

I see no reason to have any mask or vaccine mandates regarding COVID-19 in public schools at this time. In the future, if there was to be an outbreak of a highly transmissible virus that results in a high likelihood of death or other serve negative non-reversible conditions, where reliable science supports the use of such instruments, then I think elected officials at the state level should make reasonable and logical decisions for their citizens, based on such reliable science, as to the property use of such instruments. However, the citizens need to always have a choice, being aware that such choice cannot however impinge on anyone's choice.

6. What is a school board member's role and responsibility? How does that role differ from the role of the superintendent or administration? What is the best way to address differences of opinion on the board or between the board and the administration?

Answer: A school board trustee is just that, a fiduciary, or guardian, of the local public school district. To accomplish this, a trustee, as a member of the body corporate, works with his/her fellow trustees to adopt goals and priorities, monitoring success thereof; adopt policies and review for effectiveness thereof; hire, evaluate and, if necessary, fire, the superintendent; adopt a budget and set a tax rate; communicate with the community; and be an advocate for public education. The Superintendent/admin runs the day-to-day operations of the district. The Board has only one employee – the Superintendent. If the day-to-day operations are not going the way the board wants it to be, they need to address those concerns, and, if necessary, give an ultimatum, to the Superintendent.

Differences of opinion, regardless of who they are between, need to initially be dealt with by communication. People need to be able to express their opinion in a respectful and logical manner and the receiver of that needs to exercise good listening skills. So, first and foremost, there needs to be a dialog regarding the difference so that all concerned understand where the other is coming from. The focus should be on the students and finding a way to improve on their success in a fiscally sound manner. However, as stated before, the Board's only employee is the Superintendent, so while other members of the administration may assist in providing insight into the Superintendent's position, at the end of the day, the Superintendent is the one that is on the same page as the Board and enforcing that across their administration OR they are not performing as the Board expects and action should be taken accordingly.

7. Is your superintendent's and other high-level administrator's compensation in line with job performance? Why or Why not?

Answer: Absolutely. Salaries of administrators, including the Superintendent, are public knowledge from district to district. Likewise, student performance and success across all districts is also publicly available. We have the ability to compare salaries of similarly administrators within our district to those of other districts, and compare our students' success (in many areas, not just academics) to those other districts. While the Superintendent appraises her administrators, the Board sets the range of salaries by adoption of the annual Salary and Benefit Schedule (again, the Board's only employee is the Superintendent).

However, as to the Superintendent, the Tomball ISD Board uses an in-house developed appraisal instrument that the Board revises annually and presents to the Superintendent. Performance against the goals assigned to the Superintendent is reviewed mid-year, followed by an EOY appraisal, which usually last 4+ hours, where about a third of the time the Superintendent reviews with the Board his/her efforts toward the goal, a third of the time with the Board (only) discussing performance and formulating a consensus review and a third of the time reviewing the consensus-appraisal with the Superintendent. Only then does the Board consider salary adjustments for the Superintendent, all tied to performance. There will also be another 2+ hours thereafter setting the goals and determining the evidence and methodology used to evaluate each goal for the next year.

8. Is the current funding allocation within district spending categories (between administration, facilities, teachers, etc.) adequate? Why or Why not? If not, what areas of spending can be changed and how do you propose to correct it? Should resources be devoted to political lobbying?

Answer: I believe the current funding allocation within the district spending categories is adequate (but lean), as I voted to approve the current budget by fund and function. Our administrative ratio is, and always has been during my tenure, on the low end of what TEA says is acceptable for a district of our size. Tomball ISD consistently receives SUPERIOR Achievement ratings from TEA on providing the maximum allocation possible for direct instructional purposes (TEA FIRST ratings) and continuously is recognized for STRONG academic progress with LOW spend (TXSmartSchools.org; State Comptroller's FAST reports). Tomball ISD has also achieved and maintained an independent AA+ S&P/Aa1 Moody's financial rating, which requires the rating agencies to scrutinize our budgets (adopted and audited) yearly to determine if we can maintain this high rating held by only a handful of districts in Texas.

Trustees have a duty to advocate for public education, so each trustee should do so with their state legislators. That requires developing relationships between trustees and legislators whose district is within the boundaries of the school district. District (taxpayer) funds should not be used for political lobbying, BUT districts do need to educate legislators within their boundaries about the facts, needs and concerns of those districts. Legislators appreciate informational session, as they want to better understand how bills they vote on will impact school districts within their legislative districts. District voters are their voters, so the legislators (should) have a vested interest in the health of their school district(s).

9. What are your thoughts on the current and the proposed budget for your school district? As a board member, where would you look to make budget cuts? Are there any areas you would not consider cutting? How would you determine your budget priorities?

Answer: We are not in the budget prep phase right now, so my response will be limited to the current budget. As mentioned above, I am comfortable with the current (balanced) budget and voted to approve it. 86% of our budget is salaries, with only 4% spent on general administration. We utilize priority-based budgeting, so each year, every budget manager has to justify their expenditures from dollar one. We are a fast-growth district, increasing enrollment on average by 5% every year (even during COVID, when most districts suffered enrollment declines, Tomball ISD grew by 2%). The first area, highest priority, that must be covered is teachers/aides to account for growth (for the 22-23 school year, which is about 6 weeks underway, we have already increased enrollment from last year by over 1200 students). Of equal importance in priority is providing a safe and secure environment at each campus and facility. At this time, there are no areas where I would consider cutting. We have a lean budget.

10. What is the public relations role of the board? How can the board be accessible to the community? To specific community groups? How can a board of education best communicate with its constituent groups?

Answer: While the Superintendent represents the school district, the board represents the community within the district, reflecting community values and expressing expectations as they perform their governance role. As the community's representative, each trustee must be receptive to community input and assist the community in interfacing with the district. This may include empowering community members by explaining to them the process to have their concerns heard through the chain of command or it may just be as a sounding board for a community member. The Tomball ISD community has many ways to address the board, and individual trustees, through personal contact, email, attendance at open board meetings and/or participation during public comment at open meetings. Due to the Texas Open Meetings Act, access to the board, as a whole, is somewhat limited as the board can only handle school business at a duly called meeting that is properly noticed and, except for limited items, held in the open. As such, unless the communication is to individual trustees, the interaction with the board is limited to attendance at these open meetings. Another way for a community member to have access, although not directly, is to communicate directly with the Superintendent, who can then share the concerns with the board via her/his communication channels with the individual trustees. As to how best for the board to communicate, it probably is best for individual trustees to attend school and community events and dialog with our students, parents, taxpayers and employees of the district.

11. What is your long-term strategy or strategies for improving the quality of education and keeping pace with student growth within the district?

Answer: The Tomball ISD community continues at approximately 5% per year. This requires us to constantly review capacities at our schools so that we can keep up with the influx of new students. We currently have had to hold bond elections about every 4 to 5 years. While the board reviews demographic data in depth at least once a year, I am very proud of our bond process, as we always organize a community lead facility study committee prior to any call for a bond election. That committee reviews the data, hears presentations from the administration and ultimately recommends to the Board the community's "ask" for new facilities. The Board then reviews the recommendations, district financials and comments from public meetings held by the committee before ultimately deciding what to include on the bond call. This process has been extremely successful in making sure our community is aware of the needs of the district and provide them with the desired input on the front end.

As mentioned elsewhere, Tomball is a Straight A district and the highest academically rated district in both Harris and Montgomery Counties. We can never rest on our laurels. We must constantly work to improve and that is exactly what we have done. In addition to continuously challenging the Superintendent by setting the bar higher each year in his/her goals, we also have developed and funded two 5-year strategic plans, one in 2015 and the second one in 2020. These plans have been developed in a committee made up of community members, administrators and the board, all meeting together over the course of months to formulate the plan. Within these plans we articulate our strategies to continuously improve and the tasks required to be competed to effectuate those strategies.

12. What are your areas of concern regarding student achievement in your district? Do you have specific suggestions for improvement? Given all the issues that arise, how can the board stay focused on student achievement?

Answer: Student success/achievement is of paramount importance. This has, is and will be the focal point of the Superintendent's appraisal. As the educational leader/expert, it is her job to develop and successfully implement strategies, processes, programs and staffing to ensure student success. Tomball ISD is a Straight A rated district (2019 and again 2022 – no ratings provided during COVID). We are the highest academically rated district in both Harris and Montgomery Counties. This doesn't just happen. It is the result of intentional behavior and decisions, coupled with determination. My biggest concern regarding student success/achievement was learning loss due to loss of, and transition to remote, instruction during COVID. Based on internal benchmarking and the results on last year's STAAR and EOC exams, Tomball ISD students have overcome any loss caused by the disruption created by the pandemic. Again, this didn't just happen. Elimination of that learning loss was the result of intentional efforts by all staff, both during remote learning and once students come back into the classrooms. A Board, working with the Superintendent, stays focused on student achievement by having clear and definite goals and making intentional decisions in furtherance of those goals. Over the past 5 years, we have had many distractions and natural disasters, including hurricanes, flooding events, ice storms, power outages and a pandemic, but with intentionality, purpose and aligned goals, a Board and its district can stay focused on student success/achievement.

13. Is teacher performance adequate within your district? Are teacher's salaries adequate given current state budget condition? What can be done to improve overall teacher performance? What is your opinion of teacher morale in the district? Do you know the current teacher turnover rate?

Answer: Quality teachers in the classroom makes all the difference in the world. I do believe that, generally speaking, teacher performance at Tomball ISD is at least adequate, as evidenced by our Straight A ratings. That said, "adequate" is not the standard in Tomball ISD. We want to be the model that others are attempting to achieve in all areas. To that end, over approximately the past 10 years, based on the direction of myself and my fellow board members, Tomball ISD has developed a very robust and intentional professional development program for all staff, but particularly for our classroom teachers. PD is available in many areas, including quality of life, individually identified to help enhance areas where growth is needed and provided at times/places and/or via different platforms so that it is convenient, timely and meaningful. To also assist our teachers reach their full potential in the classroom, Tomball ISD subscribes to the Professional Learning Communities model to ensure best practices and mentorship is available for all teachers. Tomball ISD also has an excellent human talent group who assists principals in hiring the right individual the first time. Due to Tomball ISD's reputation as an excellent place to work (see Niche Best School ratings for Best Place to Teach, where Tomball ISD is ranked No. 1 in both Harris County and in the Houston Area), we have many applicants for relatively few positions, which allows principals the ability to hire quality individuals. As such, Tomball ISD starts with high quality teachers and, with mentorship, sharing of best practices and robust/timely/meaningful PD, we have the ability to maintain very high performing teachers.

As to salaries, while I believe starting salaries in Tomball ISD (and the Houston area generally) are pretty good, I would like to see more upward opportunity with ability (which may, but not always, track time in position). To this end, I was very excited to support Tomball ISD filing its Teacher Incentive Allotment application in the early cohort groups. This will give Tomball ISD the opportunity to enhance base pay for teachers who perform over and above "adequate" in the classroom. This program, overseen and approved by TEA, is teacher-developed and I think it will provide additional incentive, motivation and reward to our outstanding teachers.

Tomball ISD's teacher turnover rate is typically between 9%-11%. However, due to the pandemic, and attitudes toward public education, teachers have been confronted with more challenges over the past 2 to 3 years. This has resulted in more teachers leaving the profession, as opposed to leaving the district due to moving away or staying home with family. This past year, Tomball ISD's teacher turnover rate was 16%. This does not seem to be unique to Tomball ISD, but it is something that Tomball ISD, as well as all school districts, need to better understand and develop strategies to keep high performing teachers in the classroom, which may include better protecting planning time, limiting non-instructional responsibilities and ensuring that our teachers feel, and actually are, supported.

14. What type of teacher evaluation system and administrator evaluation system do you support?
- Answer:** Tomball ISD currently utilizes, and I support, the Teacher and Principal Evaluation and Support Systems (T-TESS and T-PESS). However, since Tomball ISD is a “District of Innovation,” we have the ability to develop local instruments and appraisal practices that best align with our goals and areas of concern.
15. What are your thoughts on your school district's programs for special education students, English Language Learners (ELL), and gifted students?
- Answer:** In Tomball ISD, we focus on providing the best education to ALL students. Our Mission Statement is “Tomball ISD educates students to become responsible, productive citizens by providing innovative, individually rigorous, and personally valuable educational experiences.” It is my personal belief that we provide an excellent education experience for our SPED students, our ELL students, our “on-level” students and our gifted students. That is our mission, individually rigorous and personally valuable, and I think our ratings offer some evidence that we are doing just that.
16. How does a school board balance the need to provide a quality education with the need to respond to the local taxpayer burden? Should Homeschool students be allowed to use publicly funded facilities and equipment?
- Answer:** My philosophy is that Tomball ISD will provide a safe, secure and superior educational experience in a fiscally sound manner. As a fiscal conservative, I am proud to say that I have voted to maintain or decrease the tax rate for 20 years, including for 2022 by voting to reduce the tax rate from \$1.25 to \$1.23 in an effort to balance those needs and to counter, to some extent, the Harris County and Montgomery County rising appraisals.
- I have no objection to the use of publicly funded facilities and equipment by homeschool students.
17. How do you define Critical Race Theory and its implementation?
- Answer:** Critical race theory is an academic approach that suggests racial inequity is inherent and ingrained in the laws, fundamental principles and institutions of the United States. Its implementation, and belief therein, results in, and encourages, racism, victimhood and division.

18. What do you believe about natural/biological male students competing with natural/biological female students in publicly funded athletic programs? Would you support or oppose such programs? What role does public education have in sex education and when, if ever, should it be taught?

Answer: Natural/biological males should NOT be allowed to compete against natural/biological females in publicly funded athletic programs that are set up for competition based on biological sex (e.g., women's basketball, women's volleyball, women's tennis). I OPPOSE any such program.

As mentioned, Tomball ISD's Mission Statement provides, in part, that Tomball ISD will educate students to become responsible productive citizens by providing a personally valuable educational experience. As such, I believe that Tomball ISD, and other public schools, should offer students insight into the biological process of procreation and its consequences. However, parents/guardians should have the ability/right to refuse any such classes in respect of their children/wards.

As an aside, I, together with other Tomball ISD trustees, recently voted down the adoption of the latest health book approved by the State Board of Education because of inclusive social engineering. Due to changes in the law that became effective for this school year, by not adopting the only SBOE-approved text book, Tomball ISD devoted resources to write its own health curriculum.

BY RETURNING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE, THE CANDIDATE ASSUMES FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. THE ANSWERS ON THE FOREGOING REFLECT THE CANDIDATE'S BEST EFFORTS TO ANSWER THIS QUESTIONNAIRE HONESTLY AND DIRECTLY.

Once this questionnaire has been completed, please email it to: alex@cchc-pac.org.

Please note: You ***must*** return your questionnaire from the email address to which it was sent. Questionnaires returned from any other email address will be considered fraudulent and will ***not*** be recorded and no answers will be published in the voter's guide. CCHC deems a return from the proper email address as authentication of the correct respondent.