

**Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce  
Candidate Questionnaire**

**Spring Election 2025 – Board of Education, Oshkosh Area School District**

**Please provide some personal background information.**

- Name: Molly Smiltneek
- Occupation: Immigration Attorney currently contracted with World Relief Wisconsin
- List any community activities you are involved with.
- **Oshkosh Allies in Literacy** - *Organizer and Literacy Advocate*
- **OASD Literacy Committee** - *Appointed Community Representative*
- **Dr. Eric's Skate Club** — *Co-organizer and Social Media Lead*
- **Communities of Oshkosh North** - *Volunteer and Community Presenter*
- **REAL Oshkosh** - *Member and Supporter*
- **Winnebago County Health Department** - *Member of Community Health Advisory Team and Housing Working Group and Childhood Trauma Task Force Working Group*
- **SEPO** - *Volunteer, Supporter and Partner*
- **Emmeline Cook Elementary School PTO** - *Volunteer and former President*
- **Oshkosh Food Co-op** - *Former Board Secretary and Board Member*
- **Peace Christian Preschool, an OASD community partner site** - *Former volunteer and Board President*
- **ESTHER Fox Valley** - *Former Volunteer on Immigration Task Force and CO-developer of Latino Simulation*
- **2022 Oshkosh Area United Way Sue Panek Community Impact Award Recipient**

**1. What do you believe is your primary responsibility as a board member? What will be your most important objective if you are elected to the board?**

I believe the role of the school board and its members is to, in collaboration with the District Superintendent and administrative leadership, set the strategic direction of the district in order to provide all students attending the Oshkosh Area School District with the best educational opportunities possible so that they can have a fulfilling future.

It is not the role of a Board Member to get into the down and dirty operations, but I have a duty to the students, employees and taxpayers of the district and must engage in constructive dialogue, make informed decisions, and set the direction the district is moving. I ask questions, I do my homework, I respectfully interact with district leadership and a variety of district staff, and I am accountable to parents and students in an effort to represent our community.

As a board member, it IS my role to build relationships. I hope to transform communication and engagement in our district by not only encouraging the district to tell their story but by holding myself to a high standard of integrity. I hope this will set an example and build trust in our community.

My most important objective if elected to the board is ensuring kids learn to read. Board members must establish a framework that administration and staff implement ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn to read and succeed. For example, on the last district report card, only 11 of the 117 students who identify as Black or African American at Oshkosh North read at a “meeting” level. Only one was “advanced”. That is appalling and embarrassing. I have fought long and hard for changes that are finally starting to happen in this district and I will not rest until all kids have the right to read. Every child deserves the opportunity to achieve.

**2. There are distinct differences between each of the three candidates who are seeking positions on the Board of Education. Please outline what distinguishes your candidacy and qualifications from those of your opponents.**

The mother of two OASD students (and host mother to an Italian foreign exchange student), I have a long record of being an engaged parent, community partner and literacy advocate. I am an active volunteer and served as the President of both Peace Christian Preschool (an OASD community partner site) Board and the Emmeline Cook Elementary PTO.

My education advocacy started when my children did not learn to read as students of the Oshkosh Area School District. For 8 years, along with other concerned parents, I fought for my kids and all OASD students to have the right to learn to read in our public schools. I testified at the state capitol, spoke at numerous OASD board meetings, wrote even more strongly worded letters (it’s the lawyer in me!), started Oshkosh Allies In Literacy and was a community representative on OASD’s Literacy Committee. I was a driving force encouraging the district to implement a high quality curriculum based in the science of reading, CKLA, starting in Fall 2024 (finally!).

I am a mission-oriented immigration attorney (currently contracted with World Relief Wisconsin) and social justice advocate. I believe deeply in the hard work of equity and dismantling systems where individuals or groups fail to thrive. In the school board setting, this means I am holding administration accountable to eliminate opportunity gaps and disparate academic outcomes as well as disparities in discipline and exclusion from class.

Recognized with the 2022 Oshkosh Area United Way Sue Panek Community Impact Award, I have helped run Dr. Eric’s Skate Club for the last 11 years. We have built the confidence of thousands of Oshkosh kids while teaching them to skate and have tied just about as many skates!

Since being appointed to the Board in the Summer of 2024, I have visited or volunteered at 12 OASD schools for tours, student gallery walks, school-wide reading days and more. I advocated for modifications to proposed referendum questions including inclusion of air conditioning for those schools untouched by planned facilities upgrades and for the best possible solution for Oshkosh’s youngest students, their families and the staff who serve them in the proposed Early Learning Center.

As an attorney, I believe I am uniquely situated to hold the administration and board accountable for promised improvements in communication and engagement with all stakeholders AND education outcomes. Some of the other qualities or skills that I believe make me a good board

member include my ability to engage in strategic community outreach, synthesize information and translate complex issues, and solve problems holistically, engaging people with a variety of viewpoints and perspectives.

As a person and a school board member, I always try to act with integrity and to be open, honest and transparent in my views. I strive to be responsive to those who come to me with comments, concerns, or for help, whether they are constituents or those I serve in my personal or professional life. I hold myself accountable to a standard higher than I hold anyone else. I always try to act in a way I can be proud of myself and I hope others will be proud of or at least respect me.

**3. The Department of Public Instruction produces annual school and district report cards that indicate overall student achievement and engagement. While the Oshkosh Area School District received an overall score of 69.7, which puts the district in the “Meets Expectations” category, there are still opportunities for improvement when compared to the rest of the state in Advanced and Proficiency ratings such as English Language Arts & Mathematics. As a member of the Board of Education, what will you do to ensure improved scores in these two areas?**

I have long advocated for changes in curriculum, teacher training and support and classroom practices related to literacy. We are at a pivotal time in finally making those changes. I want to be there for this historic change. I want to make sure that district staff and students are fully supported. Our students deserve to learn to read and the Board is in a position to make it happen now. This same structure should be utilized in all subject areas, including mathematics. We must move all students toward proficiency and eliminate opportunity gaps. We do that by addressing discipline disparities, having a great curriculum, supporting teachers with professional development not only about teaching practices but also implicit bias and by creating an environment filled with rigor, engagement the belief that all students belong and can succeed.

CKLA is a top of the line literacy curriculum for K-5 and is based in the science of reading. I am extremely proud that one of my first votes as a Board member was to authorize the funding for this field test for 40% of K-5 classes this year. This curriculum will be district wide next year but we are already seeing dividends related to engagement in the classrooms it is being field tested.

For the first time that I am aware of, the district has an explicit plan and strategies to support academic growth and increase student engagement. Led by Dr. Sam Coleman, the district is ingraining 4 components of a proven process to provide all students with rigorous and engaging learning experience. They focus on:

- Effective use of high quality instructional materials
- Effective professional development and coaching
- Useful assessment of students’ learning
- Meaningful educator feedback and evaluation.

Additionally, there are 4 strategies to address the causes and effects of underperformance of our students, particularly those overrepresented in our bottom quartile. Those students, in particular, will benefit as we:

- Provide intensive, systematic instruction for literacy development
- Leverage proactive classroom management to decrease problem behaviors
- Teach and reinforce social/emotional and behavioral skills
- Promote high expectations and cultural competence among all educators and leaders.

Board members must believe in our students and our staff and create a genuine school community centered in rigor and engagement. We must put our money where our mouth is and support good-faith, data-driven actions across the district that foster rigor, engagement and academic achievement.

**4. OASD is committed to ensuring all students graduate College, Career and Community Ready (CCCR). What qualities do you feel a student graduating College, Career and Community Ready possesses? Do you feel that OASD is currently succeeding in creating CCCR graduates? If not, what areas need improvement, and how would you help facilitate that as a member of the Board of Education?**

As the Oshkosh Area School District says, we must ensure all students are “college, career and community ready.” This is about workforce development and producing skilled workers but also ensuring our students are indeed prepared for where their future may take them. The role of high school is to introduce various options for their future to students and help them find a path that may be right for them. I would like OASD, particularly in its secondary classrooms, to be more nimble in course offerings, internships, partnerships and learning opportunities to ensure all students are college, career and community ready. At a base level though, it all comes down to reading and math. If a student can’t read, they are not college, career or community ready. If they can’t do basic math, they are not college, career and community ready. So, it must be a combination of advanced, specialized, timely course and educational offerings AND committing to the basics of ensuring each student achieves basic proficiency in literacy and math. Those students will be college, career and community ready.

**5. Long-Range Planning – OASD has made significant facility improvements recently, and current examples are the opening of the new Vel Phillips Middle School in 2023 and the Menominee Elementary School in 2024. This year, OASD is asking voters to approve a \$197.8 million capital referendum to build a consolidated middle school on the Shapiro site while closing South Park and Perry Tipler Middle schools, reducing from three to two westside middle schools. In addition, along with renovations at Oakwood, Traeger and Franklin Elementary schools, Roosevelt and Shapiro elementary schools will be closed in efforts to consolidate westside elementary schools from seven to five, along with a new auditorium at Oshkosh North High School, converting Perry Tipler Middle school into a pre-kindergarten center and recreation department, and air conditioning improvements at various other elementary schools. What is your position on this referendum that will appear on the April 1 ballot? Please provide reasons for your position.**

Children CAN thrive in any setting and my number one priority is to ensure that every student in OASD has access to obtaining a high quality education. At a minimum they must be able to read

and write and have the opportunity to be a successful participant in our community. I believe that students deserve high quality modern facilities in which to learn. However, new facilities don't matter unless we do the hard work of creating an overall atmosphere where kids are actually learning. For the first time since I moved to Oshkosh 15 years ago, I can say we're doing it! I am extremely proud of the hard work taking place in this district to create a positive learning environment for students to learn, thrive and achieve. I am confident OASD can transform the learning environment in each of our schools to one filled with rigor, engagement and academic achievement.

Again, neither big nor small, old nor new schools are inherently bad. It's about the learning environment that they facilitate. Sometimes inappropriate facilities can limit student engagement. Extreme heat where classes have to be relocated and kids go home sick from exhaustion or headaches, windows that don't open, having to wander a desolate hallway to get to your classroom or the elevator. Those things don't exactly make kids want to learn or even attend school.

There is a valid purpose in Consolidation. It can ensure access to educators and staff when a child needs that support. To be clear, this means that a staff member's entire caseload is in one building; this doesn't necessarily mean that there are more staff members to meet children's needs or that there are lower ratios.

Consolidation also allows the district to off board schools that are not safe or appropriate to meet the needs of the students of today and in the future and that are expensive to maintain. We can save taxpayers millions of dollars operationally every year and eliminate deferred maintenance costs. Additionally, because the regulations now state that you cannot build new educational facilities at the South Park site because it is within the most likely crash zone for planes landing and taking off from the airport, I am now worried about the safety of students attending school at that site. This is on top of the fact that building is far from an ideal learning environment. If the worst case scenario were to occur and a plane crashed into the building where students were learning - and where they can't even open the windows to escape because the windows are sealed shut, it would be a preventable tragedy at this point. And we must take action for the safety of our students.

The goal is to right size the district and the facilities it maintains to minimize expenses to the taxpayer. That is our fiduciary duty as board members. A successful referendum would be transformational for our district. Right now there is a lot of misinformation and emotionally charged opinions that focus very little on the needs of today's and tomorrow's students as well as our responsibility to the taxpayers of today and tomorrow. There are many who believe the district fails at communication, so if we focus on transparency and communication it stands to reason that we will build trust. If nothing else, it will help us understand what the solution is if not this plan. And that transparency, communication and trust will empower people to make informed votes on this and future referendums. I think this is an opportunity for positive discourse and to put students first.

When it comes down to it though, I'm tired of being mediocre. It's time for Oshkosh to give our students the opportunity they deserve. They deserve a system with high achieving students and facilities that foster learning, rigor and engagement. We are making the needed investments and changes academically. We need to do the same with our facilities. We can and must do both things at once. Our kids deserve it and we have to try. I voted to send the referendum to voters and I will be voting in favor of the referendum on April 1.

**6. Tech Education - the old Industrial Arts programs - has been slowly disappearing for many years for various reasons. Please describe your thoughts as to the need for these programs. Describe how much emphasis/weight you personally would put on this in your decision-making process as well as from a policy, expectations, and accountability stance.**

My view on this issue is very similar to my response on Question 4. Technology, and the need for Technology Education, isn't going away. It isn't obsolete. But we must be nimble and prepare our students for the technologies in today 'sand tomorrow's industry. Coding, robotics, traditional and evolving trades, CAD: these are base skill sets that are necessary at varying degrees for each student to be college, career and community ready. I do think there is room to rethink technology education and to embed it in some general ed classes. I also think that at the middle school level there still should be at least cursory exposure to technology and industrial arts.

I expect that district and school leadership are responsive to business leaders and students to know the needs and wants of students and our community. Course offerings should be reviewed regularly not only on enrollment applicability to the workforce and to emerging technologies. These educational offerings are great for workforce development and literally build up the next generation of skilled workers. This is core to our district's mission.

**7. What reforms, if any, would you support to fund public school operations? What is your view of school choice?**

In my ideal world, public school funding would be much more equitable across the state and not be tied to property taxes. Additionally, I don't think it serves students best to constantly have to go to referendum for operational or facilities needs.

I also believe that we as a society are asking a lot of our public schools and they, as a whole, are not receiving appropriate funding to meet those needs. Public schools can't be an effective safety net if they don't get funding to provide the services they must provide. Our public schools must be supported in a way so that they can support and meet the needs of all students, no matter what those needs may be. Sometimes we must address a lot of other needs before a student is ready to learn. This includes social emotional learning, community/social services and so many other means of support. Yes, it would be great to get to the root causes of the systemic problems that impact a child's ability to thrive in school. But until then, we must fully support our schools in their role as the safety net.

I am not a proponent of using public funds for voucher schools or school choice but I do see this trend as a strong sign that public education needs to be more responsive to meeting the needs (and wants) of students and families. Particularly because of the funding structure where funds are taken from public schools, without a doubt I view school choice as a threat to today's educational climate. Obviously individual parents view the vouchers as a great option and benefit to their family, but looking at the overall educational structure, if our society values educating all children, we need to make those funds accessible to our public schools.

I also believe that all schools that receive public funding should be evaluated by the same standards and have the same requirements and expectations. Ultimately, it is the taxpayers money and if some schools (generally, public) have to be accountable, do state testing, report various results, so should charter and voucher schools. That is one of the only objective ways to measure investment and success of that funding.

**8. WDPI studies report concerning trends within the current education workforce, including declining teacher retention rates on new teachers within their first five years, education program enrollment still below levels seen in 2008-09, and only 67% of possible new teachers entering the public education system along with high numbers of unfilled K-12 education positions. As a member of the Board of Education, what will you do to ensure improved retention rates among educators?**

In order to attract and retain quality educators, I think we must first define what "quality educators" are. This, yes, is partially measured by educational outcomes. It is also measured by high quality training and pedagogy as well as recruiting and retaining a staff that is reflective of or can connect with our diverse student population. Having this definition in place along with clear and consistent expectations gives quality educators the *structure* they need to know how to *succeed* in our district.

This base must be scaffolded with innovative and high quality professional development, opportunities to mentor and be mentored and collective, engaging decision making. This gives quality educators the *support* they need to *thrive* in our district.

Finally, recognition and rewards should be in place (everything from quiet thank yous to financial incentives to implementation of their ideas). This gives quality educators the *validation* they need to *stay* in our district.

Collectively, these factors create a learning and teaching environment that encourages curiosity, rigor, and engagement - in students and in staff.

It is the role of the board to clearly state the expectations and establish the big picture priorities for a school district. I believe I have outlined an effective strategy to retain and attract quality educators. It is up to administration, at the district and school level to implement the tactics, but I will always hold them accountable for this strategy.

**9. The Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce is working with local businesses and the school district on programming to help create employable students through Youth Apprenticeships and School2Work Programs. Some surrounding communities have created alternative/untraditional programming, such as the ACE Academy in Fond du Lac, which allows industry professionals to teach their skilled trade specialties directly to as many as 300 students within the existing school year using hands-on applications. With teacher shortages and upcoming building construction already in consideration, would you consider adding alternative education options into strategic planning conversations if supported by the local business population?**

Yes, definitely. I would appreciate the leadership of the business community to make this happen.

**10. What are the literacy challenges students face, and how would you address them?**

Kids can't read. It is our responsibility as a society to teach them because every kid has a right to read. And we all benefit when kids, future adults and our future workforce, can read. We must invest in our students and our staff, starting with a terrific science of reading based curriculum. It's about so much more than phonics. It's about the full science of reading. The science of reading builds foundational skills, focuses on knowledge building and comprehension and explicitly teaches not only literacy but writing -- it breaks down words and sentences and explains the "why" to kids. It does all of that systematically, building on itself, in a way that isn't overwhelming for students or staff. And it works.

In OASD we are implementing an early literacy (K-5) curriculum that is rooted in the science of reading and is on DPI's approved curriculum list as well as the list created by statewide experts. I have advocated for this for the last 8 years. We are doing the hard work, training staff and expecting a lot of our students. And we are using one of the best literacy curriculums around (CKLA) to help us with that lift! CKLA teaches the foundations of the English language systematically AND builds content knowledge. And it makes it all fun.

When I say, "every child has a right to read," I mean more than "every child has a right to learn to read." I mean that every child has a right to read books that are about them, their history, their goals. Every child has a right to read books where the characters look like them, sound like them, have the same hopes and fears as them. Every child has a right to read books that reflect them. I will always fight for EVERY child's right to read. And I will always fight for EVERY child's right to read books that reflect their identity, existence and their dreams.

Our kids have a right to learn to read in our schools. Contrary to the popular saying, kids don't become readers on the laps of their parents. There is a lot of value in reading to kids and it opens up a world of imagination, but simply reading to kids isn't enough. We as a community must put the systems in place so that all kids have the opportunity to LEARN to read.

And teaching kids to read? It pays dividends! Literacy advocate, Kareem Weaver explains,

*"But how'd you reduce suspensions?"*

*We taught kids how to read.*



*“But how’d you improve attendance?”*

*We taught kids how to read.*

*“But how’d you reduce teacher turnover?”*

*We taught kids how to read.*

*Etc, etc... sometimes answers really are simple (just not easy)*

I have no doubt kids are up to the challenge. They want to read. The challenge is that many of them have not been *taught* how to read in the past. It’s a simple answer. We must teach kids to read. It won’t be easy. There are a lot of challenges, but all kids have a right to read and they all have a right to learn how to read. We must address these challenges as a community. We all have to work together to make that happen. As long as I am on the board, I will be part of the conversation advocating for our kids and families. I am so proud to be part of this journey. Our kids are worth it.