

**Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce
Candidate Questionnaire**

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

Please provide some personal background information.

- Michael R. Ford
- Currently I am a Professor of Public Administration at UW Oshkosh. Starting March 9th I will be the Director of the Wisconsin Institute for Citizenship and Civil Dialogue at the Universities of Wisconsin.

Community activities:

- Board member of Clarity Care Inc.
- Former member of the Oshkosh Plan Commission and Oshkosh Long Range Finance Committee
- Former president of the Miller’s Bay Neighborhood Association
- Member of First Congregational Church of Oshkosh
- Former member of the Oshkosh United Way Women in Poverty Committee and Financial Health Committee
- Member of the Oshkosh Board of Review

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 a school board member is to work to maximize student outcomes in a manner consistent with the values of the community. My most important objectives will be:

- 1) Improving academic outcomes for all OASD students.
- 2) Addressing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.
- 3) Increasing trust and transparency between OASD and its stakeholders.

I will pursue these objectives by professionalizing our school board governing practices. Specifically I will:

- Align our board around a data-driven approach to setting and tracking student achievement goals.
- Work to build a fiscal transparency dashboard that demystifies education finance.
- Work to streamline communication so that all information is presented in an easy-to-understand format.
- Empower parents to be partners in creating district goals that align with their values.
- Empower teachers by giving them the freedom they need to engage in high-impact practices.

- Balance the needs of the district with the fiscal realities facing taxpayers.
- Listen.

In short, I will work to build the high-functioning school board that a successful school district demands.

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.

There are several things that differentiate me from the other candidates in this race:

- 1) I am the only candidate running for this non-partisan position without material support from a partisan political party. I have never been inside the local Democratic or Republican headquarters. I have spent plenty of time in OASD schools for my kids' basketball games, choir and band concerts, family nights, and parent teacher conferences. I care about OASD first and foremost,
 - 2) I have dedicated much of my career to issues of K-12 education. As a professor I conducted the largest study of school board governance in the United States, published over a dozen peer-reviewed articles related to connecting school board governance to student outcomes. My work has been utilized by school boards in Wisconsin and beyond, and I am frequently asked to provide expertise on school board governance to media and policymakers.
 - 3) I have a unique knowledge of education finance in Wisconsin. As evidence I was appointed to the Act 89 School District and School Financial Information Transparency Advisory Board to assist the Department of Public Instruction in the development of a dashboard to give Wisconsin residents clear education finance data across sectors (Public, Charter, and Voucher).
 - 4) I am the only parent of a student attending Vel Phillips, the district's newest school and subject of much public attention, in this race.
 - 5) My experience with the City and UWO will put me in position to work across institutional boundaries that benefits all parties.
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?

Improving outcomes requires a board that understands its role, and is capable to articulating clear goals to the superintendent and using data to measure progress and hold district leadership accountable. I will not micro-manage the work of teachers or get distracted by secondary issues unrelated to student outcomes. If elected I will bring a commitment to the 4 E's of good

governance in everything I do.

Effective: My top priority will be increasing educational outcomes for OASD students. The best way to do this is to create a data-driven culture where the elected members of the school board, the public, and the superintendent are aligned in our use of metrics, goals, and means of accountability when goals are not met. A school board member does not teach students. But, members can create a governing dynamic where the superintendent knows community expectations and can translate them into positive change.

Efficient: All OASD residents make a financial investment in Oshkosh schools. I take the responsibility of managing that investment seriously, and will fight to make sure every taxpayer knows how and why their money is being spent, and what they are getting for their investment. This means more transparency, more communication, and more proactive outreach to demystify education finance.

Equitable: A school district needs to meet the needs of all students it serves. The racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in OASD are unacceptably high. I am encouraged by the district's, and the current board's, commitment to addressing these gaps. The proof will be in the numbers, and I pledge to be a constructive voice in setting clear expectations, and providing necessary support to district staff, to address gaps. Most important, I am not afraid to pivot when existing strategies are not working.

Economical: I will be cognizant of the overall fiscal burden placed on OASD residents when considering budgeting decisions. I will bring my extensive background in education finance and public budgeting to ensure OASD is fiscally responsible in meeting the needs of students while recognizing financial realities. I will also utilize my background in state education policy to advocate for state funding reform that can benefit both OASD students and taxpayers.

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?

This is an area where OASD needs to partner with the local business community, and the UW system, to understand where are students are not ready. That type of knowledge, collected via a survey or focus groups, can help OASD identify where are offerings are not aligned with needs. I think it is good practice to evaluate this regularly as the needs of the local business community, and the demands of higher education, are always changing.

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.

I think all OASD students deserve to learn in buildings that have air conditioning, that have access to needed services on site, and that are up-to-date with the latest security measures. Our outcomes are only as good as our teachers, and attracting and retaining high-quality teachers requires quality facilities (and not making them move from building to building all day). The financial future of our district is tied to enrollment, if our facilities do not make us competitive we will lose students to school choice programs, creating a downward fiscal spiral.

All that said, buildings do not teach kids. However, inadequate facilities are a barrier to learning, and decades of deferred maintenance have gotten us to this challenging point. If we do not improve our facilities now, we will likely have to do so in the future at a higher cost. So, I do agree with the current board that we should ask voters via a referendum if they wish to support the facilities plan. I do think OASD has worked to minimize the financial impact of the referendum in ways that are to be commended.

I am voting yes personally. A yes vote keeps the debt levy at the current rate due to OASD paying off old debt, while a no vote would cut the debt levy. For me, the long-term benefits of a yes vote outweigh the immediate tax cut. But, I understand my vote is worth no more than anybody else's! I have no doubt the community is in broad agreement that our kids deserve good facilities, but the outcome will come down to whether folks feel we can afford them as presented.

If the referendum does pass I will work to ensure funds are spent in a transparent fashion and that information on progress is shared with the public so there are no surprises that erode trust in the district. If it fails, I will do my best to find alternative paths to removing barriers to learning.

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.

We need our OASD graduate set up for success. For some that is college, for others that will be a good-paying career in industry, for others military etc. I am all for expanding the career options available for our students and tech education needs to be a part of that. I will want to hear from the business community, the Tech college, and parents, as to what they need out of OASD in regards to Tech education.

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

I could write a book on this one! My broad thoughts on reforming education finance in Wisconsin are presented here: <https://mikeinoshkosh.wordpress.com/2018/04/22/fixing-wisconsins-school-funding-system/>.

In regards to school choice, my wife and I choose to send our sons to Vel Phillips and Oshkosh North. We have had great experiences with both schools. The choice works for our family. There are many parents in OASD who choose to send their kids to a specialty school within the district, or a traditional public school outside their neighborhood. There are 509 students living in the OASD district who choose to attend a public district other than OASD via the state's public school choice program. There are 202 students who live outside of OASD who use the public school choice program to attend OASD. There are another 826 students living in the district who use the state's means tested private school voucher program to attend a private school. As a board member I will not stand in the way of anyone making the choice they feel is best for their child.

I will, however, do my best to make OASD as competitive as possible so that we attract more students...both who reside in OASD, and who reside outside of OASD. I have done extensive research on school choice in Wisconsin, including focus groups of parents on what guides their choices. I have found parent decisions are driven by educational quality, facilities and extracurriculars, safety, and their personal interactions with school and district staff. If we focus on making OASD a district that truly views parents as partners, sets clear agreed upon performance goals, gives teachers and school leaders the tools and freedom to succeed, and provides competitive facilities...we will be the preferred choice of parents.

I also support reforming the way in which private school vouchers are funded. Right now, vouchers are funded through an aid reduction offset by the property tax levy. In plain language, this means OASD taxpayers pay the cost of vouchers. It is not an equitable way to fund the program...and both voucher advocates and opponents are in agreement on that conclusion. The Milwaukee voucher program is funded 100% by state General Purpose Revenue, and it makes sense for the statewide program to be funded in a more equitable manner as well. I am optimistic this issue will get fixed. I served as a legislative appointee on the 2021 Act 89 School District and School Financial Information Transparency Advisory Committee where we were tasked with helping DPI create a dashboard that will clearly show where state and local education dollars flow, including to non-public schools. I believe making this information public and easy to understand will create urgency to address the funding challenge.

As you may know if you looked at my resume, I worked for many years as a school choice advocate in Milwaukee. I saw the good, bad, and ugly of school choice and worked every day to make it a tool for reforming a system where too many low-income and minority pupils were falling behind. My 2017 book, *The Consequences of Governance Fragmentation*, is a deep dive into how vouchers came to be in Wisconsin, and how we can move past some of the politics of school choice to a more productive conversation about student performance. To that end, I have good working relationships with school choice proponents and opponents, and I am proud of my reputation as a non-ideological credible voice on a critical issue.

Most relevant to my desire to serve on the OASD board, in me you will get a board member with a unique knowledge of education policy and reform in Wisconsin. You will also get a board member who has demonstrated an ability to work across partisan lines on this issue in a constructive and impartial manner. I want OASD to be the preferred choice, and I want all students living in OASD to succeed.

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?

Teachers are the most important employees in a school district. Nothing the OASD board does will impact students if teachers do not but into it. Too many school boards in Wisconsin attempt to micro-manage teachers. We need to make it known that OASD has a board that respects teachers by letting them do their jobs, by empowering them to share what is working and what is not, and by making our compensation and working conditions competitive. I truly believe that making teachers a partner in the governing process will signal that OASD is a place where teachers can fully realize their craft without undue interference from the board. As a board member I will be focused on data, accountability, and supporting teachers, not micro-managing.

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. As I said in my previous answers, we must be open to many pathways for students. We should never place students on tracks, but we can empower them with more choices and pathways to a fulfilling career and life.

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

I support a focus on the foundational elements of education, if students do not have literacy skills they will lack the foundation for everything else. Far too many of our students do not have the literacy skills they need as measured by state tests. I support continued implementation of 2023 Wisconsin Act 20 that has shown promise in implementing scientifically based literacy education. Like I said earlier, my job as a board member will be supporting teachers and staff as they continue to implement their improved approach to literacy.