

Taxpayers for Public Education School Board Candidate Survey

Candidate: Kevin Larsen

District: C

1. What is your vision for Douglas County School District?

Douglas County School District is a strong school district. It the single biggest attractor to people moving into our communities, thus keeping our home values up, and giving our families and their children access to an education that prepares them for today's, and tomorrow's, world.

Delivery of education is changing. From blended learning whereby students can supplement their classroom setting with virtual sessions that have access to a remote teacher, to electronic textbooks accessible with "smart" devices, to breaking free of the model of educating kids in a one size fits all approach, we must provide a full array of options for parents to find the best setting for the child to learn, whether that prepares them for college, finding a trade or a skill, or being prepared to enter the workforce and begin a successful, independent, productive life as an adult.

I see a DCSD that will prioritize attracting and retaining the best teachers, as teacher quality is a strong indicator of a child's likelihood to grow academically. Restructuring compensation so the best teachers are paid the best, and the hardest to fill positions are remunerated reflective of the marketplace, will set Douglas County apart for success.

Innovative ideas where kids can move through the school system based on readiness and ability, rather than a chronological vintage date will be welcome here. This is, and will be, a school district where best practices are freely shared and performance is measured, so that we are always fine tuning our ideas and improving education.

2. What is your view on the Douglas County School District Bond/Mill question (3A 3B)?

I favor the mill levy override (3A) because first, it stays 100% in Douglas County, and second, it enables us to implement a key reform initiative in Pay for Performance. We've got to back up attracting and retaining the best teachers and the hardest-to-fill teachers as we compete with other districts. The evaluations underpinning the compensation were collaboratively developed between the district and teachers. As this gets underway, it will need to be monitored and calibrated to ensure it accomplishes what is intended. It has criterion referenced goals (rather than norm referenced) so it encourages collaboration among teachers and schools to share best practices. They are rigorous goals with a bar set high that must be reached in order to attain the highest compensation level.

I favor the bond (3B). Again, this is completely local money, not exported to the rest of the state. It enables us to fund some new schools or additional wings in identified growth areas, it lets us address some sorely overdue maintenance in our buildings (a safety issue) and equipment, and it funds technology infrastructure and tools that build a platform for delivering education in the future.

If 3A and 3B pass, the district would receive an average increase of \$45 per property. That takes into account an average decrease in Douglas County home values of 9.5%. To fairly assess the cost, we should separate the effect of decreasing home values from the increase in mill rate. Without passage of 3A/3B, the DCSD portion of property tax on

the average \$340,000 home would drop by \$70. With the measures passing, the bill goes up \$45. That's a cost of \$115 for that \$340,000 home.

That comes to 1/30 of 1% of the home value. That proportion holds whether your home went up or down in value, and whether your home is worth \$175,000 or \$600,000. So I ask myself whether I believe the allocation of funds from 3A and 3B will make my home at least 1% more valuable in 30 years than if we don't approve them. I believe they will.

I believe the value of 3A and 3B outweighs the cost. That's why I support them.

3. What is your view on Prop 103?

I oppose this measure. First, because it would simply fund education via the status quo; there is no component for innovation, educational reform, or results-oriented funding. Second, because it would cost Douglas County taxpayers more money in increased taxes than DCSD would get in additional funding. In other words this would exacerbate the byzantine, dysfunctional, statewide school finance system where Douglas County School District taxpayers don't get their fair share.

Nowhere does this measure guarantee that this additional money during this so-called "timeout" will go only toward education. Even if the new revenue went entirely to education, there is no way to prevent the legislature from reallocating other education money, thus reducing the net gain in educational funding from Prop 103.

I believe the cost of Prop 103 to Douglas County taxpayers outweighs the value. That's why I oppose it.

4. Do you believe that Douglas County School district is equitably funded at the state level?

No. First, the labyrinth called the funding formula employs a number of factors that work against Douglas County. As a result, our district ranks about 160 out of 184 in per pupil allocation from the formula. As the bulk of the state revenues come from income taxes, there is a higher proportion of income taxes allocated to K-12 being paid by Douglas County to the state than returns in K-12 funding to our district.

Since 1982, we have had the Gallagher Amendment which freezes the ratio of residential to commercial property tax revenues statewide at 45%/55%. That level reflects the relative value of property statewide in 1982. But like many parameters in tax policy, it was never adjusted to reflect the times, such as today when residential property is closer to 75% of the total.

The result of this is two problems. One, the relative funding of school districts changes from 65% local/35% state in 1982 to the opposite today. This increased dependence on the state for funding reduces local control, and increases vulnerability to state revenue deficiencies. Secondly, it puts localities that are more heavily residential, such as Douglas County, at a disadvantage in raising a mill as compared to Denver, which is richer in commercial property. For example, the present 3A proposal to raise \$20 million in Douglas County would cost \$115 on a \$340,000 home. In Cherry Creek, with the Denver Tech Center commercial base, that same \$20 million might cost closer to \$40 per home. In Denver that comes closer to \$15.

5. What is your view on vouchers in Douglas County School District? One criticism of the voucher program is that the standards of private schools are different than those of public schools. If the Choice Scholarship Program should prevail in court, do you believe that schools that accept taxpayer dollars should have to comply with the same standards as our public schools? For example, should participating private schools be able to discriminate based on race, sex, religion, disability or sexual orientation?

I support the Choice Scholarship Program that is on hold for the moment. The discussion over the past year has been a good exercise for me to examine my belief on public school funding and parental choice. I believe that as a society we have agreed to have public funding of schools (through collection of taxes) because a well-educated populace leads to lower crime, a more productive workforce, more informed electorate, and better home values. I also believe that a school board's charges are all school-age children residing in its boundaries, and the ultimate best decision-maker for each child's education choice is his or her parent. Creating a system where all our district's children have access to their best options is a good thing.

This pilot does not divert any public education money that was otherwise being directed for kids in the public schools, either in Douglas County or elsewhere in the state. It allows the per pupil revenue (PPR) already being provided to students who were in DCSD schools to be retained – 75% to the family, 25% to the district – that would have otherwise been lost if that child had moved to a private school without the program.

The reason for establishing a pilot was to test this innovative approach and monitor all the components of the program to see if they would work. Assessing the students, making sure that any DCSD student who wished to participate could have an option, and the proportion of PPR that went into the scholarship are some of the aspects of the program that would be measured and calibrated through this pilot phase. While not changing the admissions or educational policy of the partner schools, would this program be able to provide options to any Douglas County student? That was going to be tested and monitored.

6. What is your vision on meeting the needs of special education students?

We need to educate all students, and when budgets have been challenging, it has been difficult to meet the needs of special education students. We should strive as a district to provide the right learning environment and resources for these students, but we should also welcome parental involvement, including the option to find a specialized school that specifically addresses those needs. One thing a scholarship voucher does is empower the parent to seek the school best for the child.

7. What is your vision on retaining and recruiting highly qualified teachers?

I want to pay teachers as professionals. In my world, where I am surrounded by professionals, we are compensated base on the rarity and need of our skill, and the performance of our job in reaching agreed upon goals.

Applied in the teaching world, I believe that having market based salaries would attract some good people who hadn't considered teaching because they had better compensation options elsewhere. By rewarding good performance, you create a setting where the best teachers will want to stay, the next tier of teachers will want to reach higher, and those who prefer the safety of a seniority structure will seek other districts.

The Pay for Performance idea outlined by the district uses the CITE and other goals that are being developed by administration and teachers collaboratively. A board isn't going to micromanage every detail, but it is going to give a general direction it wants a plan to have. Key for me is that the targets are criteria-referenced. High targets, but if you reach them, you get rewarded. Best practices are shared when two parties can both benefit.

8. What should be the role of political parties in school board elections? Have you accepted the endorsement of a political party, or any other organization? Have you accepted funds from any source other than private citizens?

Political parties are collections of people who, while they may differ on particular issues, generally have core principles in common that they wish to see carried out. It is only natural that a political party would take an interest in candidates, especially for a position in something as important as education.

I have accepted the endorsement of the Douglas County Republican party. Those with a different party affiliation – or none at all – should be proud of whatever support they get, too.

I have worked very hard for many years to make this district better. Between classroom volunteering, to mentoring and tutoring, to serving on a SAC, the DAC, the Fiscal Oversight Committee, all of that experience has shaped my positions on educational issues. I've earned my points of view and I have been up front and honest about them long before I got into this school board race.

My positions were developed first; the financial support came after those with similar views felt inclined to help me get my message out to voters of our school district. All of my campaign's contributions, many of which came after the first reporting period closed, have come from individual, private citizens.

9. The Choice Scholarship program was found unconstitutional in a recent court decision. School board members take an oath to uphold the Colorado Constitution. As a member of the school board how will you deal with the conflict of the BOE continuing to support and defend the Choice Scholarship Program?

I reject the premise that supporting and defending a program conflicts with upholding the Colorado Constitution.

First, the board is abiding by the decision and injunction of the court. If it were not, there would be a conflict.

However, the current prevailing decision is not the last say. Appealing a decision of a lower court does not imply a disregard for law or the constitution. It is simply a request for a higher court to consider the case, given a belief that the initial ruling will be overturned. Should we abandon all appellate courts because the first ruling is the final word? Of course, not. I am quite certain that either non-prevailing side will continue appealing this case until it reaches the court of last resort. And that's fine because there is a strong interest in having some clarity and finality with the subject.

While that takes place, it will cost money. I think it is very prudent that the school board found private resources to fund the legal fees associated with this appeal. No resources were taken from the classroom to see this case furthered.

Would it be nice to have private foundations also fund programs in the classroom? Yes, and in fact, the district applies for and receives grants from time to time. But that makes the Daniels Fund contribution to the district's legal defense fund no less valid.