

10 questions: where the candidates stand

What should the district do about the Cubberley Community Center site (4000 Middlefield Road)?

JAY CABRERA suggests “redoing Cubberley from the ground up” based on a mixed-education model, with spaces for elementary, middle and high school students. Since Foothill College already has a presence there, there could also be a college-prep program for high school students. Investing in revamping Cubberley is one of his top three budget priorities.

GINA DALMA would immediately implement a community needs assessment for Cubberley, make sure the lease is renewed for five years and “use those five years to ensure that we’re building a community vision for that space that includes a high school and co-location of services that the community wants.” She thinks the district should be building a close partnership with the city to develop a forward-thinking, long-term vision for Cubberley. She said the \$1.8 million payment to the district from the city as part of the 1989 covenant not to develop — an agreement the city opposes renewing and the district favors — “might be something that’s slowing things down.”

KEN DAUBER said he is “committed to producing clarity for the city” on Cubberley. “Whether we can be clear about when we’re going to do school construction at this point, I don’t think so. But ... we can develop a plan with the city that says, ‘Here’s what we are going to reserve for school use; here’s land that we think would make sense as a community center; here’s joint use.’” He said the covenant not to develop — the sticking point in negotiations between the district and city — “clearly reflects realities that are no longer there” and that both the district and city need to be more flexible on the issue.

CATHERINE CRYSTAL FOSTER calls Cubberley a “jewel” and said she would ask for a community needs assessment to determine the best use of the property. “We need to act on it and make some decisions,” she said. “The game of chicken needs to end. Just saying, ‘Well, (the terms of the lease are) going to roll forward if we just let it expire,’ — that doesn’t seem to me to be leadership.” She said the district should clearly say that it will need Cubberley within 10 years. It could be repurposed as a school and community facility with a design lab, internships and other programs.

TERRY GODFREY said she’s hopeful with new leadership in the district and on the City Council, these negotiations can move forward.

Should the district open a 13th elementary school?

CABRERA supports opening a 13th elementary school.

DALMA has said that the district “obviously” needs a new elementary school. In Palo Alto, “We’ve had a very, very short-term vision, and we haven’t made decisions very forward thinking,” she said, adding that the district needs to create a five-to-10-year facilities plan to better prepare.

DAUBER has repeatedly stated his support and the urgent need for opening a new elementary school. He has said that over the last 20 years, the average size of Palo Alto’s elementary schools has gone up by a third, yet the district has only opened one new elementary (Barron Park in 1998). He said research shows the optimum size for an elementary school is between 300 and 400 students, but only two of the district’s primary schools have populations that small.

FOSTER said the discussion around the need for a 13th elementary school should consider the future of Cubberley and other facility decisions. She said that ideally a new elementary school would open within three years.

GODFREY is supportive of opening a new elementary school but said she would rather invest money in foreign-language instruction in elementary schools if she had to choose between the two.

Should foreign-language instruction be provided in elementary school?

CABRERA said that implementing foreign language at all levels is a “great idea” and that the board “should find a way to make it happen in context of budget restrictions, and I feel there are ways to do that.”

DALMA, who was born in Mexico and is bilingual, supports increased foreign-

language instruction for both its academic and cultural benefits. She would create a five-year plan for how to get foreign language in all elementary schools.

DAUBER has identified foreign languages in elementary schools as a priority during his campaign. He has advocated cutting spending on legal fees and public relations as well as making more realistic budget projections to free up the money for “something as impactful and important as foreign language.”

FOSTER has said investing in innovation, including foreign language in elementary schools, is one of her top budget priorities. “I’ve heard again and again talking to people in this community that they want (foreign language in elementary schools). ... Our budget should follow our priorities as a community, and it should follow our values,” she said.

GODFREY served on the Foreign Language Elementary School (FLES) advisory committee in 2007 and 2008 to launch a program, which the board failed to approve. She said the financial picture was too grim at the time to move ahead but that it seems like an “obvious fit” for the district and should get done now.

Should the board repeal its June resolution criticizing the Office for Civil Rights?

CABRERA has said he would repeal the resolution and that his priorities as a board member would be to increase collaboration and transparency.

DALMA thinks the district needs to change course on its relationship with the Office for Civil Rights and would vote to repeal the resolution. “We will not be able to build a relationship with the OCR ... with a standing resolution that clearly states that the OCR is ‘purposefully confrontational and disruptive and with no regards to instruction,’ that it acts ‘with the intention to promote confusion and concern,’ that ‘questions the integrity and honesty of the lawyers of the OCR,’” she said at last week’s board meeting. “These words connote confrontation, not collaboration.”

DAUBER has been a vocal critic of the resolution since before the campaign and is committed to repealing it. He thinks getting the district on the right path with its special-education families starts with getting on the right path with civil rights, which means collaborating with rather than fighting the federal agency. He has also criticized the amount of money the district has spent on Office for Civil Rights-related legal issues.

FOSTER has said she would repeal the resolution if the allegations made against the Office for Civil Rights are not true. She has said she is “troubled” by the allegations but that there is not enough information publicly available to know whether they are true. She said at the first debate she would have voted for the resolution, albeit reluctantly and only if the allegations in the resolution are true. “We need to cooperate absolutely, fully and completely with the OCR, but to the extent that we see an issue of concern, I think that all of us share the concern (that) we want that agency to be functioning as well as it can.” She has also said she “does not support expending district funds to engage in a fight with OCR, period.”

GODFREY has said if she had been on the board, she would not have supported the resolution. She has not said if she would repeal the resolution but instead has suggested the district propose participating in a post-mortem with the federal agency to evaluate and learn from both of their processes. Her reading of the resolution is that it authorizes the board to lobby elected officials and education coalitions, a process Godfrey said should not have to include lawyers and “can be a collaborative approach to giving the agency feedback.”

Your opinion of district versus school-site decision-making?

CABRERA strongly supports school autonomy and thinks decisions made by the board should be a 50-50 collaboration with schools. If schools need resources to implement their plans, it’s the board’s responsibility to see that resources are provided. If the board wants schools to implement a program, the board has a responsibility to “prove” to the schools why and how they can do it.

DALMA thinks that programs, whether they’re site-specific or district-wide, should be evaluated to make sure they are working well. Innovation comes at the very local level, but unless the district is documenting it, evaluating it and understanding what it means in terms of student achievement and whether it’s scalable, then innovation

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will only serve that specific set of kids, she said. Her bent is to prioritize services that help students reach their full social, emotional and academic potential and then “make sure that policies are applied throughout the system.”

DAUBER has said the district should make sure that its guiding philosophy actually is guiding the work of individual staff members and that it provides every child the best the district has to offer, no matter what school they go to or no matter which teacher they have. The key is evaluation. If there are inconsistent practices across the district, they should be evaluated for success, and the ones that are working should be propagated throughout the district.

FOSTER has said Palo Alto has a culture of autonomy of schools that has both a beauty and a cost. What works well is that it lets creativity and innovation bloom. What works less well is that can create a kind of inconsistency that can lead to concerns, and sometimes resentments, among students and families. If there are inefficiencies related to constantly reinventing the wheel, that points toward a need to change site-based autonomy, she said. On issues regarding student safety, health or legal mandates, it’s imperative that there be consistency across the district.

GODFREY has said it is more important to her that programs have the same outcome than the programs themselves are identical. She has also repeatedly said that Palo Alto should make sure the thousands of decisions made every day remain closest to the students.

Your view on the district budget?

CABRERA wants the budget to be more transparent and easily accessible online. He has also proposed cutting the district’s Basic Aid Reserve Fund cap from 10 percent to between 5 to 8 percent to free up money to “alleviate some of the strains that are coming up in the community” and classrooms.

DALMA has said she thinks the budget needs to be better aligned with the new state Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which obligates each school district to develop a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). “The magic of these plans is it forces the school district to align exactly what expenditures are being made to achieve goals. ... The first thing I would make sure to do is to update the next season and take from January to April to evaluate it,” she said. She thinks investment in evaluation is key to figure out which programs aren’t having an impact and then to cut them.

DAUBER said he thinks the district uses an “overly conservative” property-tax projection (2 percent), which “causes us to underestimate quite substantially our income when we’re formulating the budget. ... And the cost of that to the district is that ... we might well choose not to do things that we actually have the capacity to do and that the taxpayers of the community really have a right to expect us to do with those dollars.”

FOSTER has said this is a time when the district needs to be “extremely prudent,” but “you don’t want to be so conservative that it inhibits you from being able to be a little bold and a little innovative when you need to be.” She said her first top priority is evaluation, followed by professional development, writing instruction and advances in innovation (not necessarily in that order).

GODFREY said her top budget priority would be looking at the budget itself “to figure out if we have the right resources in the right place doing the right job.” She has also called the current property-tax projections “conservative” and advocates for instead laying out various scenarios for different property-tax percentages so the district “know(s) where the next dollars are going to go and (is) prepared to spend them when the time comes.”

Your view of the district’s implementation of inclusion programs?

CABRERA has said he’s not an expert on specific inclusion programs in Palo Alto but that he brings “an open slate to listen to community needs” on the topic. He supports inclusion as a way of rethinking traditional models of education.

DALMA said that “we know that full inclusion is a best practice, but it assumes that a certain support system is in place. The more I talk to parents and teachers, that’s exactly where our school district has not done the best job.” She said she would invest in professional development to help students do a better job; set specific goals and

measure achievement toward those goals through collecting data; and learn from what other districts are doing on inclusion.

DAUBER said the district has “some distance to go” on implementing and managing inclusion effectively. He said in the 2014 Strategic Plan survey, 57 percent of teachers said they feel they need more professional development on special education to be effective in the classroom. He said he is encouraged by Superintendent Max McGee’s request that the district director of special education report directly to him. Monitoring and getting direct feedback from students, parents and teachers is also essential.

FOSTER also said inclusion works best when it is well-supported and there are case managers who clearly understand and communicate the goals for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in general-education classrooms. She said in order to work, inclusion must also be a commitment shared by the whole school.

GODFREY said inclusion is really “meeting every student where they’re at,” and that is both a “beautiful thing and a challenge.” She said the board needs to make sure teachers are provided the time and resources necessary so that inclusion is “mak(ing) their job richer and not making their job harder.”

What would you do about the achievement gap?

CABRERA attributes the district’s slow progress on closing the achievement gap to poor leadership. He also thinks “mini Strategic Plans” tailored to individual students would help because he sees the current Strategic Plan as too broad to make an impact.

DALMA said that “there has never been a real push to close the achievement gap” in Palo Alto. She advocates adding a specific Strategic Plan goal that says “in five to 10 years, we will close the achievement gap (and) 100 percent of our kids will be proficient.” She said she would look to other school districts that are doing better by their minority and low-income students and bring best practices back to Palo Alto.

DAUBER is a strong advocate for using data to be more precise about where the district’s areas of strength and weakness are with respect to the achievement gap. He said he would provide the direction and resources necessary rather than to “generate pedagogical strategies.”

FOSTER sees data and evaluation key to decreasing the achievement gap, which she called “a shame on our district.” She said high expectations for all students, professional development and a shared leadership commitment are all essential.

GODFREY has said a culture of high expectations is important, as well as equity training for teachers and staff and a focused recruitment of minority teachers.

How is the district doing on managing student stress/well-being?

CABRERA said student mental health is “one of the most important issues we need to deal with as a community.” He thinks a system that rewards all students for all achievement — not just good grades or high test scores — would help.

DALMA has said there needs to be a community conversation about how Palo Alto defines success and that the community’s value system, along with parents and peer groups, contribute to student stress. “Success is that each and every one of our kids achieves their passion and reaches their social-emotional potential,” she said. Evaluation is the best way forward on student stress and mental health, and the homework policy in particular should be looked at and implemented more consistently.

DAUBER has said issues around student stress and well-being are what first got him involved in schools. He worked to get the district’s homework policy adopted and has participated in Project Safety Net. He is not satisfied with the progress the district has made and points to the district’s failure to evaluate the implementation of the homework policy as an example. He would ask for more metrics, an evaluation of the homework policy and more work on coordinating test and project schedules.

FOSTER said she’s pleased to see the district making an effort to hire more staff to provide mental health support in schools, such as social workers. She suggested evaluating Adolescent Counseling Services’ impact to determine how well the non-profit is addressing the needs of students.

GODFREY, a co-founder of Project Safety Net, said that she thinks the stigma around mental health is starting to fade away — citing a recent increase in referrals reported by Adolescent Counseling Services — but that there is still a long way to go. Things like implementation of the homework policy will help, although it does not cover honors or AP classes and so is not perfect. Inconsistent teaching — for example, two students taking English 10 from different teachers, with one doing a lot of work and the other not doing much work — is also stressful for students, so investing in teacher consistency is important.

Your opinion of Common Core?

CABRERA said he's been told by Gunn High students that they feel completely prepared academically. What they need is real-world skills such as how to do taxes and how to get an apartment. Students in Palo Alto would greatly benefit from Common Core, but the board needs to make sure to assess it.

DALMA, who is on a national steering committee working on Common Core implementation, has said Common Core is the single most important education reform in several decades for California. She lauds the new standards but has warned Palo Alto's transition to them is a long-term commitment and requires a push toward more professional development, education technology and formative assessments.

FOSTER is excited about Common Core as an opportunity for Palo Alto to dig deeper on critical learning and teaching. She said data from past programs such as Everyday Math should also inform the roll-out of Common Core adoption.

DAUBER is an enthusiastic supporter of the new state standards. For Palo Alto the Common Core is consistent with what families want for their kids — to think critically, synthesize information and reach across disciplines. He has cautioned that the district should pay attention to the Common Core-produced gap in student assessment, since a new standardized test was piloted last academic year but results were not released.

GODFREY said she's also a supporter of Common Core, describing it as the first federal curriculum standards in decades. Some of its components are not new: Palo Alto has always had a lot of interplay between teachers and students. As far as testing, the district needs to keep on track and know how students are doing so that it's prepared when Common Core-aligned test debuts. Overall, teachers are enthusiastic about Common Core, and the district has done a good job giving them the time and space to prepare, she said. ■

Cabrera

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thing that's going on there. I've chosen not to attend board meetings at this point in time partly for that reason."

Cabrera has also pointed to flawed leadership as the cause for many problems that plague the district, such as the achievement gap and lack of support for special-education students.

"I feel that the primary thing to acknowledge as someone running for school board is that the current school board and, in many ways, current people running for school board are not the people who need to be in power to fix this," Cabrera said in reference to the achievement gap at the Sept. 20 debate hosted by parents of students of color and students with special needs. "We need to empower people who are of the demographics and of the community who need to make the changes. ... That means that, as a school board, our goal needs to be to provide the resources and funding and staff to empower leaders in our community."

On the topic of resources, Cabrera has repeatedly advocated that the district lower its budget reserve cap from 10 percent to between 5 to 8 percent of the budget. Unused funds should be going back to the classroom, he says, and could help to reduce class size and pay for innovations such as incorporating coding into curriculum.

Cabrera supports the introduc-

tion of coding instruction into schools as a way to better prepare students who will enter a rapidly evolving workforce — and says that should be a no brainer for a school district located in the heart of Silicon Valley.

He said if elected, he would institute a process to analyze the feasibility of adding coding into Palo Alto schools.

On the question of school autonomy, Cabrera said he doesn't support a top-down approach and that ideas for programs to implement district-wide should come from the community rather than the board.

"I ... feel that it's healthy to have different cultures at different schools and for the schools to function slightly differently," he added. "Is it efficient? Is it the best for budget, tracking, all that stuff? Possibly not. It's possibly not the most efficient, but we're human beings. I feel like the human touch of wanting a personality and wanting to be different is more important than everything to be machine-like."

He said in light of the district's huge range of programs and policies, from dress code and handbooks to counseling systems and cheating policies, spreading best practices should be done on a case-by-case basis. Like the other candidates, he said it is important to have comparable outcomes — for example, that Gunn and Palo Alto High School's differing counseling programs remain individualized but are held to the same standard for producing results. ■



Robert Frank, Detroit, 1955. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Raymond B. Corp. © Robert Frank. Courtesy: Rosewood Gallery

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