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EDUCATION

See what Akron school board candidates say about former superintendent, APS academics, more



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This story has been updated.

The race for [Akron school board](#) is one of the most-watched contests in this election.

Much is at stake with four of the school district's seven school board seats up for election and Akron Public Schools sitting at a crossroads. The district of nearly 20,000 students and more than 3,500 employees faces a multimillion-dollar [projected budget shortfall](#), major building projects in [Kenmore](#) and [North Hill](#) and the rebuilding of the community's confidence following the fallout of the controversial departures of the past two [former superintendents](#) and the swift hiring of Superintendent Mary Outley.

The eight people seeking the four nonpartisan, at-large seats are current school board members [Diana Autry](#), [Gregory B. Harrison](#) and [Carla Jackson](#) and fellow candidates [Cynthia D. Blake](#), [Gwen Bryant](#), [Nathan R. Jarosz](#), Karmaya Kelly and [Phil Montgomery](#).

On Oct. 8, they fielded questions about academics, finances and the recent turmoil surrounding the district that were posed by local journalists during the Akron Decides school board debate, sponsored by the [Akron Press Club](#), [Akron Beacon](#)

[Journal](#), [Ideastream Public Media](#) and [Signal Akron](#). Ideastream, which aired the 90-minute debate live, will broadcast the debate again at 9 p.m. Oct. 9 on WKSU 89.7-FM.

Candidates differ on Akron Public Schools superintendent departure, hire

Questions that drew the most contrast from candidates concerned whether they agreed with how current board members handled the departure of Superintendent Michael Robinson, who signed a separation agreement following an investigation that found he created a toxic work environment, and the [hiring of Superintendent Mary Outley](#), whose hiring came around midnight on April 28 and just minutes after Robinson's separation agreement was approved.

Autry, who has served on the board since 2020, and Jackson, who joined the board in 2021 and is the current board president, defended the board's actions. Both said the board was required to give Robinson his due process against the allegations against him and they made the decisions based on the verified facts, not gossip.

"Board members cannot act on the whims and emotions of the community," said Autry, who added that she didn't want to pay Robinson his large salary for him to sit at home on administrative leave.

Jackson and Autry also stood by their votes to hire Outley immediately. They cited Outley's history with the district and her leadership serving twice as an interim superintendent.

"Leadership requires soldiers and not sheep," said Jackson, noting that Outley is an Akron Public Schools graduate and a daughter of the community. "You have to be strong in leadership and operate with wisdom. A disservice was not done to this community. We're talking about a veteran educator who came up through the ranks in this very community."

Harrison, who was appointed to the board in October 2024, said Robinson should have been placed on administrative leave immediately after the board learned of the allegations against him.

Harrison said he supports Outley but he disagrees with the board's process to hire her, saying excluding the public from decisions made for a public school district is wrong. He said the process should have been more transparent.

Harrison was one of three board members to vote against immediately offering the superintendent job to Outley.

Blake, who retired from the banking and property management industries, said the board could have handled the situation better and more discreetly, saying she believes some board members, faculty and staff sought to sabotage Robinson's leadership.

Blake and Bryant said they agreed with the board's hiring of Outley, with both of them stating Outley had already proven she was qualified for the position when she served as interim superintendent.

Bryant, a former Akron Public Schools teacher who now works as a national education consultant, said a colleague called Akron the "superintendent slayer," and she believes the district is lucky that Outley is willing to lead it.

Based on her experiences in school districts across the country, Bryant said she would not have hired Robinson because he was from a right-to-work state, where she typically sees superintendents who run their districts like kings; his previous experience was in a district no bigger than the Firestone Community Learning Center cluster; and because he didn't have much experience dealing with a union, especially a teachers union as powerful as the Akron Education Association.

Jarosz, who founded the nonprofit Leadership Influencing Teen Empowerment, said the board failed the community by not including its voice in the process to hire the next superintendent.

“If we took a swing on a big decision like a superintendent and, after less than two years, we're removing that person from the job, we'd better get it right the next time, and doing it at midnight with no input from the community is absolutely disrespectful to you,” Jarosz said.

Following Robinson's departure, Jarosz said district leaders must act with transparency, accountability and a mindset to continue to improve. He said the district also must provide a safe working environment for all employees, where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

Kelly, who is a caregiver, said her goal is to move past the recent controversies and ensure the district doesn't encounter a similar situation by working with other school board members to address aspects that were preventable, including taking a zero-tolerance stance against bullying.

She disagreed with the board's process to hire Outley and said it showed weak leadership to not include the community, staff and students.

“She is highly celebrated, but there is a process to appointing and hiring superintendents, and this board did not do that,” she said.

Montgomery, a parent of two Akron Public Schools students, said he believes Robinson should not have been hired as superintendent, should have been put on administrative leave immediately, and should have been able to be fired for cause without the hefty settlement package.

Montgomery, who is Summit County's finance and budget director, said though Outley might be the best person for the job, the board did a disservice to the district by not getting community feedback before making the decision.

How would the candidates improve Akron Public Schools' academics?

The candidates also presented differing views on how they would seek to improve academic outcomes for students. Akron students overall scored better on state tests

last year compared to the year before, but still lag state standards in many areas. The district's graduation rate remains below 90%, and less than half of third graders are proficient in reading and math.

Montgomery and Jarosz both said the board's role should be to support the experts — superintendent and teachers — in their efforts to improve academics. Both also said they believe the district should rely on its community partners to help with academics and after-school activities.

Kelly said she would seek to evaluate which community partnerships are effective at improving academic outcomes. As a mentor, Kelly said she encounters students, including high school students, who struggle to read and spell. She believes the district needs to support more parental and mentor involvement.

Harrison said the district should connect with community partners to help ensure children are coming to the district prepared as preschoolers and kindergarteners. He said he believes the board also needs to be proactive in ensuring it is allocating the proper resources to support academics and not waiting until the state test results are released.

Blake said she believes county and city officials also should invest in students, and the school board should be open to all the ways it can help students. She criticized the board for rescinding an online tutoring contract that would have helped struggling third graders at no cost to the district. The board had been facing an unfair labor charge by the Akron Education Association because it said the district was outsourcing union-protected jobs.

"I felt that online help was better than no help," she said.

Jackson, a middle school principal and director of entrepreneurship at [Emmanuel Christian Academy](#) in Akron, and Bryant, who has been in education for more than 30 years, said they believe their career backgrounds would benefit the board in making decisions pertaining to academics.

Jackson also values visiting classrooms to see whether the teachers are getting the resources they need.

“What you expect, you inspect,” she said.

Autry said she believes the district needs to support its strategic plan. She said district leaders also need to celebrate big and small wins — such as Akron having the best graduation rate among Ohio’s eight urban districts — to show their support for educators, students and staff.

Autry also said she believes the full-day prekindergarten classes the district began when she was board president will lead to better academic scores in the next few years.

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