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Candidate forum covers lots of issues

Ruth Campbell

7-9 minutes



Wayne Woodall, candidate for Position 3, talks about his positions on a variety of issues during the ECISD candidate forum Thursday at Odessa College. (Ruth Campbell | Odessa American)

Candidates for the two Ector County ISD school board spots up for election May 6 covered topics ranging from why they are running and improvements the district needs to make to bullying and vouchers during a candidate forum at Odessa College Thursday.

The event, held in the Saulsbury Conference Room of the Electronics Technology Building at OC, was organized by Odessans for Ethical Leadership and moderated by CBS 7 News Co-Anchor Mary Kate Hamilton.

Running for Position 3 are incumbent Donna Smith and challenger teacher/coach Wayne Woodall.

Position 7 incumbent Dennis Jones will square off against Robert Thayer, lead pastor at Odessa Bible Church, and John Dietz Rabenaldt, a retired district employee who worked in IT.

Thayer also taught in the humanities department at Odessa College.

After a mention that ECISD has gone from a D to a B in state accountability ratings, Woodall said the Texas Education Agency dropped its ratings down and every district in the state got a COVID bump.

Woodall said he thinks they need to shrink class sizes, have more discipline and change the hyper focus on standardized testing.

“That’s one of the reasons we’re having so much trouble with our kids reading and math cores is because they basically across the board is because they’ll treat math and reading like it’s a survey course,” Woodall said. “What I mean by that is they hit the highlights and if the kids don’t get it, they don’t get it. They keep moving forward and that’s got to stop.”



Dennis Jones, Position 7 incumbent, talks about a topic during an ECISD candidate forum Thursday at OC. (Ruth Campbell | Odessa American)

Jones would like to see expansion of career and technical courses. The Permian Strategic Partnership has invested \$6.1 million to start an energy pathway.

“Our local economy here depends upon us graduating young men and women who are ready to go into the workforce. These are going to be the career and technical jobs that are out there in our oilfield,” Jones said.

Another issue is overcrowding in ECISD’s traditional high schools.

“This community has kicked the can down the road for far too long in building another high school,” Jones said.

The candidates all agreed that a bond is needed.

Woodall said he thinks more than one new high school is needed because smaller is better.





John Dietz Rabenaldt, vying for Position 7, talks about issues during an ECISD candidate forum Thursday night at Odessa College. (Ruth Campbell | Odessa American)

Rabenaldt said the overcrowding in the high schools is not going to be solved by just one new high school. Each school could accommodate 2,000 or even 1,000 students and be dedicated to a particular program such as fine arts or science and technology.

Rabenaldt added that at least one more middle school is needed to cut down on busing.

Smith said the district is in good enough financial shape to float a \$400 million bond without raising taxes. She also expressed concern about busing kids from West Odessa and having them spend hours on the bus going to school and coming home.

While schools are being built, which would take about three and a half years, Thayer said the district could make use of less crowded campuses.



Robert Thayer, a candidate for Position 7, talks about his ideas Thursday during the ECISD candidate forum Thursday at Odessa College. (Ruth Campbell | Odessa American)

Thayer added that principals need to have more discipline.

"I think you've got to give the principals more freedom to discipline children and sometimes their hands are tied. We all know how to take care of a bully. They don't get to come back. They get three strikes and they're out," Thayer said.

Jones said only about 3 percent of the students in ECISD are bad actors.

"If there's only 3 percent, that's OK; we'll lose 3 percent," Thayer said.

He added that he believes all children deserve a chance to learn, but it's unfair to have one student in a classroom make it impossible for 15 others to learn.

Woodall said the golden rule needs to make a comeback and cultural change and parent involvement are necessary.

Asked about vouchers, the candidates expressed mixed opinions.



Dennis Jones, Position 7 incumbent, talks about a topic during an ECISD candidate forum Thursday at OC. (Ruth Campbell | Odessa American)

Smith does not support vouchers and said they harm public schools.

"I think they harm public schools. The legislature right now has a \$32 billion surplus. It's like a once-in-a-generation surplus. In the preliminary budget, they have set aside \$1 billion for vouchers. Now the preliminary estimate of how much ECISD is going to increase from this giant budget is less than 1 percent. Vouchers won't do what we're being told they're going to do. Private schools don't have to accept all kids. Private schools are not transparent. They're not accountable. All I hear sitting on this board is ECISD has to be more transparent and that private schools don't have to show us their curriculum. Private schools don't have to reveal their financial status. Private schools don't have to tell us that, oh we've had five years of failing classes. There is no penalty for consecutive years of low performance," Smith said.

"Teachers don't have to be certified. They are generally paid less than public school teachers."

The boards are appointed not elected and you don't get to call your board members and tell them what to do, she added.

At the current time, Rabenaldt said parents have choices. There are charter schools, home schools and private schools. He said he does not support 100 percent taking money away for vouchers.

If a private school would like to be accountable and the money goes directly to that private school, the teachers are certified, they are

evaluated by the state, then maybe some kind of tuition payment plan could be worked out, Rabenaldt said.

Jones said he believes vouchers take money away from public education and he is a product of public education along with a lot of people at the forum.

“I would hate to think that a child is being shortchanged because of some nearsightedness and political pandering in Austin. I don’t want to see your tax dollars or my tax dollars going to a private entity that is not accountable, as Donna said. I don’t think that it is the best solution,” Jones said.

He added that Arizona passed a voucher bill in the last couple of years and it is already \$200 million over budget.

Jones said he thinks Texas would follow that if it passes.

Woodall said he supports vouchers because children belong to their parents not to the state of Texas.

Looking at Senate Bill 8, he said the state is going to take two years, see what the program looks like and evaluate it from there.

Woodall said \$8,000 would go to the private school, but the public schools would get \$10,000 to replace that. They are going to have to be accredited and take an approved standardized test. He said they do take all students and Woodall said he wants to see schools get better.

“I want to see our schools compete and not lose any of these kids,” he said.