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Five candidates vie to fill three vacancies on Orinda School Board

By Sora O'Doherty

Five candidates seek to fill the Orinda Union School Board seats being vacated by Carol Brown, Jason Kaune, and Liz Daoust in the November general election. There will be a candidates forum on Oct. 13 from 6 to 8 p.m. in the Orinda Library Auditorium for OUSD as well as Moraga-Orinda Fire District candidates. Since that is after press time, Lamorinda Weekly put a number of questions to the candidates, and they all responded. The five candidates, in alphabetical order, are Michelle Chang, Edda Collins Coleman, Linda Delehunt, Eve M. Phillips, and Katie Shogan. Chang has 24 years of experience as a teacher, principal, and central office leader. Shogan holds an M.Ed in educational policy and management and has experience as a public school teacher, administrator and school board member. She helped establish ONE Orinda and was vice president of fundraising for the Sleepy Hollow Parents' Club. Former Orinda city council member and mayor Phillips, who has four children, ran a digital mental health startup, which she believes gave her an appreciation and understanding of the importance of key behavioral health issues like anxiety and depression and ways to address them. Delehunt holds a doctorate in educational leadership, graduated from UC Berkeley and also holds a Master of Education degree. For 10 years she consulted for the California Department of Education and wrote GATE curriculum for OUSD. Coleman is a parent of three preschool and school-aged children and is an active member of the OIS Parents' Club board. She has over 20 years experience as a policy and communications professional.

When asked if the OUSD should have handled the COVID pandemic differently, opinions differed slightly. Chang felt that the district did well, using the data available and their experience to open the schools in a safe manner. She thought that her daughter's elementary school did an incredible job. Shogan thought that the district did a good job, but observed that "it became abundantly clear that children need to be with peers for both their social-emotional well-being as well as their growth and development." She believes that there is now work to be done addressing the impacts of prolonged social isolation. Coleman believes that there is always room for improvement and that critical lessons were learned during the pandemic. Phillips pointed out that the OUSD board "was under immense and conflicting pressure from parents, students and teachers to make decisions in an unprecedented environment." She added, "In retrospect, I think we now have a better understanding of the significant social and emotional health issues faced by children being at home for that length of time, and for the learning loss sustained." Delehunt was impressed with the OUSD response to the pandemic, finding staff to be amazingly dedicated and organized. She cited countless hours preparing and delivering the academic program.

All of the candidates responded positively to a question about how a primarily wealthy district can fit into the statewide initiatives for school breakfasts and lunches. Shogan pointed out that providing every student an excellent education includes ensuring that each student's basic needs are met so that they are ready and able to learn, while acknowledging that Orinda schools were accustomed to more control over food offerings and suppliers before the state program commenced. Coleman stated that "these programs have been shown to play a crucial role in student health, well-being, and academic success." She added, "When students succeed, it benefits the entire community." Phillips pointed out that making meals available to all students removes any potential stigma associated with them. While acknowledging that there is room for improvement, she also thinks that parents need to have appropriate expectations. Delehunt praised the statewide breakfast and lunch program as one of her favorite school initiatives, and a supportive measure in all communities. Chang said, "I recently heard from an educator in Orinda about a family who had to forego paying some of their bills in order to pay the fees for their child to participate in sports" at school.

On the subject of balancing academic achievement and social/emotional wellness, Coleman said, "Physical health and emotional health are intimately intertwined and when we approach academic success this way, we can help students fully achieve greater academic excellence." She explained, "My plans call for exploring different pedagogy and strategies for grades K-8 as well as encouraging mindfulness training for teachers and students, which has been shown to enhance attentional and emotional self-regulation and promote flexibility." Phillips responded to the question, saying, "Schools can be a safe haven for students to find an audience and potential solutions to those issues, and so I am happy to see our continued investment both in counselors as well as OIS's Wellness Center. I believe that investment will pay off in the resulting academic achievements of our children."

Delehunt pointed out that Orinda Intermediate School just received the Blue Ribbon Schools Award, affirming that "the hard work of students, educators, families, and communities in creating safe and welcoming schools where students master challenging and engaging content." Shogan appreciated the many steps that OUSD has already taken to ensure well-being, including the establishment of wellness centers and increasing access to programming and resources related to mental health. She did note that "in a highly competitive community like Orinda, balancing academic achievement with well-being will always be a challenge." Chang said, "If we want our students to do well, they need to be well." She added, "If students do not feel safe and ready to learn, they will not learn." She pledged to work with other board members, the superintendent, and staff to address these areas of growth.

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