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4 with varied experience stump for 2 school board seats

NORTHAMPTON - Each of the four candidates vying for two at-large seats on the School Committee said if elected, they vow to keep all the elementary schools open. They promise to seek creative ways to save money. They say they will work to foster communication about the board's business, including school matters and budget issues, with parents, constituents and teachers.

By **CATHERINE BAUM**
Staff Writer

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While candidates Robert Schroeder, Blue DuVal, Michael Flynn and James Young share some priorities, their approach, ideas, and backgrounds differ widely. Schroeder says he would rely on his business acumen to seek out new revenue for the school system. Flynn said his experience as a teacher, Ward 7 School Committee member and appointed member on state education boards would be a valuable contribution to the board in myriad ways. Young, a self-described problem solver, said he seeks a chance to be creative in finding revenue sources for city schools. A regular volunteer in the schools, DuVal said her understanding of individual schools and passion for communication will open a dialogue so residents will feel part of budget discussions.

Whoever wins next week will succeed at-large members Katherine Foote Newman and Lucy Hartry, both longtime members who opted not to seek re-election. What follows is a look at the at-large School Committee candidates on the ballot for the Nov. 3 election.

Blue Marie DuVal

Age: 49


Address: 38 Sandy Hill Road

Family: daughters Jett, second-grade student at R.K. Finn Ryan Road School and France, 19, college student; son Carl, 21, U.S. Marine


A Northampton High School graduate, DuVal has lived in the city for 27 years. While she has not held elected office, she has many years of experience in the schools. She is a regular chaperone for student field trips, a volunteer photographer for school calendars and events, and a volunteer speaker in classrooms. She recently gave a presentation on snakes at the R.K. Finn Ryan Road School, where her daughter is a student. Her passion for student education and her desire to contribute to decisions affecting city students drove her to seek a School Committee seat.

"I'm running for School Committee because I think it takes a village to raise a child and I think so often people become involved in individual schools," DuVal said. "We have a problem with unity in our

1 2 3 4



JAMES YOUNG



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schools, and I think unity is important."

DuVal said she believes the School Committee needs to lead by understanding the culture of each school and tailoring its discussions accordingly. And, she said, board members should be well acquainted with each of the schools before making decisions about them.

"All the schools are different; I've been in them all and I know they're not the same," she said. "It's not a cookie-cutter program. When making decisions for schools you have to know that."

Another reason DuVal said she is running is that she wants to be a model for her daughter, Jett.

"I want to show her that you can implement change just by standing up and being a voice," DuVal said. "You have to be a voice sometimes for people who don't have one."

Communication, DuVal said, is key to making decisions that will ultimately be good for the schools. If elected, DuVal said she would create an interactive Web site to communicate the School Committee's business to the community. She would share her opinions on the blog, which would be independent from the School Committee. For example, she might opine about her dissatisfaction of a school board vote that OK'd a student field trip to Costa Rica. The trip costs more than \$2,000 per student and it wasn't posted before summer, DuVal said, which she believes put some students at a disadvantage.

With advance notice, DuVal said, some students would have saved money from their summer jobs for the trip or hosted fundraisers over the summer so they could attend. "I believe all children should have equal opportunities, and yet they all voted for it," she said.

DuVal said she believes the School Committee should tap into resources in the community in organizations such as the Lions Club and Volunteers in Northampton Schools, and that it should initiate finding volunteers. For example, she said, business owners and consultants could be tapped to analyze school budgets and data to suggest solutions.

"Northampton is so rich with professionals," she said. "There's so much opportunity for networking that even if everybody contributed just a little bit, we would have so much available to us."

Michael B. Flynn

Age: 34

Address: 9 King Avenue

Family: wife, Theresa; sons Daniel, second-grade student at Leeds School, Sean, student at Cloverdale Cooperative Nursery School, Collin, 2 years old; daughter Allison, kindergarten student at Leeds Elementary School

A lifelong city resident, Flynn is a second-grade teacher at the William E. Norris Elementary School in Southampton. He currently is chairman of the school board's curriculum subcommittee and the Ward 7 representative on School Committee.

"I'm running mainly because I'm committed to public education - it's something I've dedicated my career to and I have a vested interest with children in the school system for the next 20 years," Flynn said. "We'd like to see the schools be a greater learning environment for all children. I bring multiple layers of experience to the board, and I want to share that."

If elected to the at-large seat, Flynn said he will push the School Committee and the community to advocate for a study to change the state funding formula for education, which is based on figures from 1993.

The dated formula "didn't take into account increases in health care, utilities, requirements schools must meet," Flynn said. "Education's become way more expensive because of things that are not funded in the funding formula."

Another priority Flynn states is to recoup the school personnel, services and programs that have been cut over the years, including the elimination of the elementary school bus fee. To save money, Flynn proposes schools streamline operations by "becoming more paperless" through technology. He suggests the committee put one-time monies into reserve accounts to create sustainability and use recurring revenues to bring back positions.

"Times get tough but things get better, too," he said.

To strengthen communication with the community, Flynn proposes the School Committee have a

regular column in the local media. He also suggests having a conference committee for School Committee members and city councilors to discuss budget issues regularly - not just the annual joint session during budget season, as is the current practice.

"That once-a-year meeting seems like a formality, and I think we could form a more productive alliance," Flynn said.

Robert Schroeder

Age: 40

Address: 39 Ladyslipper Lane

Family: wife, Carol; son, Rory, first-grade student at R.K. Finn Ryan Road School; daughter, Anne, preschool student at the Clarke School for the Deaf.

Schroeder has lived in Northampton for seven years. He has never served in elected office, but decided to run for School Committee in part because he believes his experience as product line manager at Berry Plastics could be of benefit to the School Committee.

"As a parent, I want to ensure that my kids and the kids of our time get the best education possible," Schroeder said. He noted that he believes the School Committee needs to seek creative solutions to budget shortfalls. He believes someone like him "who has a lot to offer from the business world might be able to add new ideas to the mix."

Schroeder has been in sales for 13 years. As product line manager at Berry Plastics, he contributes to the company's marketing, investment, and pricing and promoting strategies. This background, Schroeder said, would make him an asset to the School Committee.

"It incorporates a lot of what the School Committee is facing" in terms of "looking at the budget, finding revenues and using scarce resources," Schroeder said. "It's in line with what they're doing but more on the business side."

Schroeder said the School Committee should lobby, campaign or advocate to get more funding for schools from the City Council.

"The funding we get from the state and the federal government is a big concern," he said. "It's not realistic. I think the School Committee needs to advocate to get a bigger slice of the pie and find ways to grow the pie."

Schroeder also wants to see the board trumpet success in Northampton schools and engage the community in its schools. The community, he said, could use the schools more to host public forums or athletic events at the JFK Middle School pool and gymnasium.

"The more people we can bring into those facilities and make use of them, the more vested they become in the schools' survival and thriving," Schroeder said. "They're going to want to support the schools in various ways that will only benefit the town."

Schroeder said he is committed to making Northampton schools the premier education district, which he believes will increase funding, grants and property tax revenues.

"I think people forget how important schools are in determining the property values of the town," he said. "If our schools are considered to be the best in the state, people will then want to pay to live here."

James Young

Age: 39

Address: 184 N. Elm Street

Family: Wife, Betsy; daughters, Nina, 6, student at Jackson Street School, and Iris, 2; son, Jacob, 4

A Northampton resident for eight years, Young said he is running for School Committee because he has a vested interest: He plans to educate all his children in Northampton schools. Though he has no experience with elected office, he said he now wants to be involved in his community, particularly addressing children's issues.

"I want to be a part of the decision making to make sure that our kids are not getting just an adequate education, but a superior one," Young said.

Young wants to consider local initiatives that would address revenue shortfalls. A senior database administrator for Pearson Evaluation Systems, Young believes his experience with data, projects and management will enable him to bring problem-solving, fresh perspectives to the School Committee.

"We need to find a way to make it so that we're not entirely dependent on the state," Young said.

If elected, Young said he would work to increase the Northampton Education Fund's endowment and research how it could be used to fill gaps in the school system. He also believes local business owners and parents could help fund school operations.

"We have a lot of families in town who choose to send their kids to private school at four or five figures a year," he said. "If they knew that they could get just as good an education here, I bet a lot of them would sign up."

Business owners are another resource, Young said. There is interest among local businesses, he contends, to support school programs. Young proposes companies use money from their advertising budget to fund a program such as a healthy lunch program, because, he suggests, the business would benefit from the publicity in the school community. Young noted the School Committee would be charged with overseeing participating companies to avoid controversy.

Young supports art, foreign language, music and sports programs, and he believes such creative funding resources could help maintain and grow these programs.

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