

Meet the 2012 Columbia School Board candidates

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COLUMBIA — On April 3, voters will choose from four candidates to fill two seats on the Columbia School Board. Those seats are now held by Christine King and Michelle Pruitt. King is running for re-election; Pruitt is resigning from the board.

Here's a look at the candidates.



Paul Cushing

Age: 49.

Years in Columbia: 11.

Occupation: IT Coordinator at Miller's Professional Imaging.

Education: Vocational degree in electro-mechanical engineering at Pinellas Technical Education Centers in Clearwater, Fla. He has also taken IT classes at Ozarks Technical Community College in Springfield.

Personal ties to district: No children attending school in the district.

Community involvement: An active member in Mid-Missouri Big Brothers Big Sisters program and Columbia Strength and Conditioning.

Political experience: First time running for public office.

Reason for running: In a somewhat spontaneous effort, Cushing was inspired to run for a school board position because of the debated tax levies and bond issues for the district. "If we raise taxes, at what point do the taxes end?" Cushing asked. Instead of raising taxes, he suggests the district add a surcharge on property development. "We need to re-focus on the center of Columbia and the buildings there," he said. Cushing also wants to create an atmosphere in the district that localizes education to each neighborhood and encourages technical skills as well as traditional academics.

Most important thing to contribute: From his experience with overcrowded school districts from his education in Florida, Cushing seeks to appeal to Columbia parents and residents as an advocate for a small, neighborhood-oriented school system. He said his strong time commitment to the district would help set him apart.

No. 1 challenge facing the district: The "growth issue" and overcrowding in schools. Rampant growth in the area is threatening the ability of the district to effectively educate due to monetary concerns, overcrowding and a lackluster economy," Cushing said in a CMNEA survey posted on his website.

Something Interesting: Cushing grew up in central Florida, where he worked at his father's demolition business and at a Caterpillar Inc. dealership.

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Christine King

Age: 46.

Years in Columbia: 12.

Occupation: Worked for State Farm until January 2009, now a "full-time volunteer."

Education: Undergraduate degree in finance from Miami University (Ohio).

Personal ties to the district: King has a fourth-grade daughter at Paxton Keeley Elementary School and a seventh-grade son at Smithton Middle School.

Community involvement: King is a member of the Columbia School Board and the Parent Teacher Association at Paxton Keeley, committee member for United Way, member of Assistance League of Mid-Missouri and a board member of Columbia Youth Basketball Association. She also coaches two teams and is member of Woodcrest Church.

Political experience: King has been on the Columbia School Board since 2009, a board member at Columbia Montessori School from 2002-2007, their treasurer in the first year and a chair from 2003-2007. She was the chair of Partners in Education for State Farm from 2002-2007 in partnership with Rock Bridge High School.

Reason for running: King has enjoyed being on the board for the past three years and said she

feels the district is making positive steps, but moving forward takes time. King said her time on the board has made her more confident in why it does what it does. She said though she still has questions, she knows who to ask to find answers and that she sees running for re-election as a means of continued service.

Most important thing to contribute: King said one of her strengths is the leadership and knowledge she has gained from her three years on the board. Part of this strength, she said, is her ability to look at the district as a whole and see the big picture. She said one important function of the board was hiring a strong superintendent to help communicate its decisions pertaining to the district to the appropriate level.

No. 1 challenge facing the district: In the short term, King pointed out the bond issue and tax levy. King said the district and community need both of these and that the funding from these items will help make Columbia Public Schools more effective. In the long term, King said maintaining the financial integrity the district has had under Chris Belcher is important. King said this will increase public trust in the district and will in turn help the district make effective decisions.

Something interesting She was on "Widman's Way with one of her Columbia Youth Basketball Association teams.

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Melvin Blase

Age: 77.

Years in Columbia: About 40.

Occupation: Currently retired, but was a former professor, researcher, author and adviser to developing countries.

Education: Bachelor's degree and master's degree in agricultural economics from MU, doctoral degree from the economics department at Iowa State University with a major in agricultural economics.

Personal ties to the district: Three children graduated from Hickman High School.

Community involvement: Member of Golden K Kiwanis Club, and of the Agricultural Economics Emeritus Professor organization.

Political experience: No prior political experience.

Reason for running: Blase said a high school teacher made all the difference in his life and that this helped him to see how important teachers are. He also said that based on feedback he has received, he can contribute a great deal of common sense as a potential school board member.

Most important thing to contribute: Blase said he has four ideas he wants to contribute if elected to the board. He wants to improve excellence in teaching, help find additional resources as the district looks for ways to fund its programs, develop programs to help people fill care-giving roles and help people understand the unique problems of developing schools on the rural-urban fringe. He said he is accustomed to thinking outside the box.

Blase also worked with about 30 developing countries in an advising capacity. His past service on boards includes: the Jefferson Institute, Missouri School of Religion, a number of university consortia.

No. 1 challenge facing the district: Blase said he sees two issues as most prominent. The first is a focus on excellence in teaching, which he described as "where the rubber hits the road." The other issue he wanted to focus on was looking at the cost of financing the public education system in a service-based economy.

Something interesting: His ancestry goes back 150 years in Missouri and in St. Charles County, and there's a road named for his grandfather.

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Rex Cone

Age: 49.

Years in Columbia: First came in 1980, moved back in 1996.

Occupation: Freelance media producer.

Education: General studies degree from Columbia College in 1987.

Personal ties to the district: Cone has a son at Russell Elementary School and daughter at Smithton Middle School. His wife graduated from Hickman High School and works for Rock

Bridge High School. He served on the redistricting committee and intermediate curriculum committee; PTA member since 2004; classroom volunteer.

Community involvement: Member of Parkade Baptist Church, Columbia Public School District

committees and classroom volunteer, member of his neighborhood association before moving, former member of Boone Regional Beekeepers Association, member of Columbia Police Department Citizen's Academy

Political experience: No prior political experience.

Reason for running: "The primary job of the board is to set policy, employ the superintendent and clarify purpose. That's the primary function of the board. My reason for running is to help monitor district performance. I want to represent my community on the board, assure that our students are receiving the best learning environment to succeed. For a self-serving reason, I want people in Columbia to be smart people. I want educated people of all ages around me. Part of what the board does is set policy and clarify purpose. I think I can help with that. Everyone who runs and everyone who works for the district is really working in the kids' best interest. I have no agenda or single issue that I'm fighting or holding up. I want our district to be the best in the state."

Most important thing to contribute: "I really believe in transparency in the process. I want to represent the community so we have transparency, so everyone feels like their tax dollars, their kids, their voice is being heard. If people feel there's transparency, they'll feel decisions that are being made are good. People say I'm a level-headed guy. It's that notion of the truth will win out. As long as you can see where it's going and what it's doing, you might not like it, but you can see why it's necessary."

****No. 1 challenge facing the district:** Cone said he thinks the biggest challenges are reducing the number of trailers used in the district and making sure the district can financially support early childhood programs such as Parents-As-Teachers.

Something interesting: "I've lived in Africa. I collect pennants. At one point, I lived in South Africa when apartheid was still there. I've traveled all around the world."

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