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Candidates discuss state of education at forum

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The three candidates running for two seats on the Hart district board this November exchanged ideas and opinions on public education during a Tuesday night forum at the Santa Clarita Valley International Charter School.

Incumbents Steve Sturgeon and Gloria Mercado-Fortine are hoping to secure their fourth terms on the board that governs the 23,000-student school district.

Challenger Heather Davis is a first-time candidate who teaches at a charter middle school in Pacoima and previously worked at Sulphur Springs and the Acton-Agua Dulce Unified school districts.

Davis told the crowd of 30 parents during the relaxed discussion that she began as a yard mom at her daughter's school and eventually decided to go back to school to become a teacher.

Her school, M.I.T. @ Vaughn, has grown in enrollment, hired teachers and created innovative programs to reach students.

The three candidates agreed that charter schools will remain a part of public education and locally within the SCV, which has seen a rise in the number of charter schools opening.

"Charter schools, in my opinion, are here to stay," Mercado-Fortine said. "We need to provide students with options. We need to provide parents with choice and options because not all students work in one setting."

Charter schools must be sponsored by a school district. While they are publicly funded and tuition free, charter schools have flexibility in how they teach and are operated.

The Hart district has four charter schools, including SCV International, a K-12 school that counts more than 600 students at its Castaic campus.

Davis said she enjoys teaching at a charter school and has added iPads and interactive white boards to her daily lessons.

"Charter schools give you that flexibility," Davis said. "Public schools often don't."

She agreed with Mercado-Fortine on the new ways charter schools provide students and suggested that the Hart district incorporate more of the flexibility charter schools have.

"I think that children have a right for the education that works best for them," Davis said.

The two incumbents touted their multiple terms on the William S. Hart Union High School District board and longtime leadership within the Santa Clarita Valley as reasons why they want to stay on the board.

Sturgeon, a local business owner, called his role as a board member a "second occupation," dedicating hours a week to his governing board duties.

"I believe I have one more term left in my body and blood," he said.

Outside her board member role, Mercado-Fortine is an educator, who has served as a counselor, school and district administrator. She focuses on charter schools and worked with the Los Angeles Unified School District on numerous charters, she said.

Local school board races historically generate low voter turnout within the SCV.

Moderator Dennis King, a former Hart board member, encouraged parents to stay informed and vote.

"You could have a profound impact on what happens," he told parents. "School boards are true local government and a few people can make a big difference."

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