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Place 7 RRISD School Board Trustee Candidate Forum hosted by Round Rock ISD Council of PTAs

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Good evening, and welcome to the Round Rock ISD Council of PTAs School Board Trustee candidate forum for Place Seven. I am Snehal Phirke the president after Round Rock ISD Council of PTAs a non-commercial non-sectarian non-partisan Association that does not endorse any candidate or political party. The Round Rock ISD Council PTA is aware of alleged endorsements by individual PTA leaders. The council does not condone or support such endorsements implied or real. And those who have not followed PTA protocol proper elections have been instructed to cease and desist immediately. I will repeat PTA does not endorse candidates. I would like to welcome our special guest Texas PTA President, Suzi Kennon. Thank you for being here today. Our advocacy committee represents all learning communities, and the questions for these forums were sourced from our community. As you know PTA is the oldest and largest child advocacy organization in the nation. With the mission to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children. Please allow me to remind our participants that families including children will be watching this forum live as well as recorded. We expect everyone to conduct themselves in a professional manner and be respectful of our volunteers and each other. If we notice disruptive behavior a warning will be given and if it continues it will be addressed. We hope everyone will be civil and cordial so that we can have an informative session today. With that, I present to you our Council PTA Advocacy chair, Heather Lawrence.

Hello. And thanks to the candidates, viewers and our Round Rock ISD Council volunteers for joining us today. I will also be the timekeeper for today's forum. It is my honor to introduce you to our moderator for these forums, Maria Medina Milner. Mrs. Milner is a notable and accomplished voter engagement and community outreach leader in central Texas. She leads and develops non-partisan comprehensive community voter outreach and partnership programs across all communities and school districts. She is also the third year founding leader of equity and inclusion at a leading voter engagement organization. As a Latinx cultural consultant Mrs Milner co-founded VOCES Tejas in 2017, presenting regularly on the topic of Latinx voter outreach to communities throughout the Texas Hill Country. She is a spokesperson and panelists on the topic of voter engagement and history at numerous events. She is also featured as a nonpartisan voter outreach leader on media programs throughout the Austin area including regular guest spots on Univision. We thank Mrs. Milner for lending her time and expertise to the candidate forums. And with that the candidates are in your good hands, Mrs. Milner.

Thank you to the Round Rock Council of PTAs for the invitation to moderate tonight's forum. I'd like to take this moment to remind our audience that when we discuss an office such as School District Board of Trustees that we're discussing down ballot voting. Down ballot voting is the process of voting for officers that are often attached to our major elections such as voting for president or Congress and Congressional office. I'd like to introduce the candidates tonight for Place 7, Jenn Griffith and Danielle Weston. They will be giving a two minute candidate statement and a 90 second closing statement. They will be given one minute to answer each question. Our timekeeper will hold up a yellow card at the 30 second mark, and a red card when time is over. Candidates are asked to refrain from any

personal attacks on their opponents. In the event that a candidate loses their web access we ask that you quickly reenter this form. After reentering the webinar you will be allowed to answer the questions that you missed, time permitting. We will ask the questions in ballot order and alternate who begins each time. So with that let's begin with the two minute statement from Jen Griffith. Ms Griffith?

Thank you. Good evening, everyone. My name is Jen Griffith. I'm running for obviously for Place seven. My husband Greg and I have lived in our home in Brushy Creek for 21 years. And we have four children Emma is a sophomore at Texas A&M, Cooper is a junior at Round Rock, Carter and Travis are in 8th and 7th grade at Cedar Valley Middle School. My husband grew up here and went to Spicewood, Grisham and Westwood and we absolutely love it here and we couldn't see raising our kids anywhere else. I first began serving in our schools through PTA when Emma was in kindergarten over 14 years ago and has served on an executive board pretty much every year since then and many different capacities. I've been part of the executive board for Council PTAs for three years, and I'm currently in my second year serving on a district level committee as well. I've also been a member of several booster clubs over the last six years and I feel it's very important to serve my community in a very Hands-On way. And in the last three years, I logged over 550 volunteer hours working with our PTAs and several schools. I love giving back to my community and serve on many local philanthropies through young men service league with my oldest son Cooper and I volunteer with Partners in Education and currently sit on the Board of Trustees for Saint David's Round Rock Medical Center. I'm a residential realtor and small business owner and chose this career to allow me the flexibility to spend time with volunteering in schools and community and teaching my kids the value of hard work. I'm running for school board because our students deserve to have an excellent foundation in public education that will prepare them for the challenges of the future our students deserve safe schools physically and emotionally, our teachers deserve to expand on the great tools that they already have to engage students and Creative Learning while allowing for less time on standardized testing. I'm committed to working with the board and leadership to help continue giving our students the best possible outcome for everyone. Thank you.

Thank you. Now we will hear from Danielle Marie Weston, Ms Weston. You have two minutes.

Thank you. Okay, so thank you to council PTA, the moderator and my opponent for tonight's forum. Texas PTA is one of the largest advocacy organizations in the state and I appreciate this opportunity. My husband and I have five children, who are the joy of Our Lives. We have two Aggies, a Red Raider, two Round Rock High School dragons, one in the fine arts program and my daughter is a multi-sport student athlete. And as of last week, I'm now the proud mom of Round Rock's newest Eagle Scouts. Like many people watching tonight. I have an extensive volunteer history in our school district. I spent years on Title 1 campuses as a mentor on elementary and middle school campuses as a PTA volunteer and on high school campuses as a booster volunteer. I earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and a master of arts in human resources and leadership. I'm a proven leader and have served seven years in the Air Force as a captain both on and after 9/11. And I worked for years as a business leader in the private sector. I'm currently an elected board member on the Round Rock High School band boosters, whereas the volunteer coordinator. I'm responsible for recruiting and coordinating more than 300 volunteers for over 3,000 hours of service to the dragon band. This requires cooperation, encouragement, and flexibility to mobilize this kind of effort for this common goal. My advocacy for our students spans years and I have invested the time and energy that is required to be prepared to serve as a trustee. I appreciate the opportunity to reach our community tonight.

Thank you all. So let's go ahead and get started with our questions from the community. The first question for the candidates are, Share how you've been engaged within our community. How about experience assist you as a School Board member. Ms Weston?

Thank you for that question. So I think what's important for when people are considering and evaluating the candidates. Is the preparation that they have put into becoming trustees. So I have attended virtually every school board meeting in person, for over two years. Now, I attended almost all of the safety task force meetings when they met for 18 months. I regularly attend in-person facilities and policy meetings held at the district level and I've also as I said in my intro, you know heavily invested as a mentor on our Title One campuses and as a boost for volunteer. I think that demonstrating prior to becoming a candidate a vested interest in how the district operates and understanding this feel of it is very important. Thank you for the question.

Thank you. Ms Griffith?

Thank you. I have you know with the experience that both Danielle and I have volunteering, it's very important to note that we are working hands-On with the people in our schools and our community to help us understand the needs of each different school. And what makes them unique and different. You know, volunteering takes a lot of your time and effort and you are working with lots of different parents, lots of different students and staff across the district to just learn how to work well with others, how to you know, make good decisions that aren't based just on what you want for your child. But what's best for everyone in this goal. Whether it's your your school or a different school that you might be volunteering with. And I think that just having the experience and knowledge of so many different things in the district is something that people need to look at whenever they're thinking about who to vote for and I have put in quite a bit of time and and volunteering and I feel that all the work that I've done with parents and administrators and teachers across the district is very helpful. Thank you.

Thank you. Ms Griffith, With many new schooling opportunities in the district including Charter, private schools, and online, what are your plans or strategies as a board member to support retaining students in the Round Rock ISD Public Schools?.

I'm sorry. I need to turn my volume up. Can you repeat that?

No problem. With many new schooling opportunities in the district, including Charter, private schools, and online, what are your plans or strategies as a board member to support retaining students in Round Rock ISD Public Schools?

While we cannot determine what the best environment may be for every child's learning experience. I'm fully confident in the education that Round Rock ISD is providing to our students and I have the most confidence in our amazing teachers and staff. Charters do have specific criteria for admittance and they will not take all students even though they are getting public education funds. Bottom line, it's a personal choice for every family, but I believe in Round Rock ISD, I believe in the tools that we already have available to our teachers and our staff and our students and I would just want to continue making those tools better and just providing more opportunity for them to be used throughout our district. and you know, to give everyone an equal chance and everything, but you know, what we have is already amazing and I would just want to improve on that.

Thank you. How would you answer, Ms Weston?

Well, I would answer by saying that my husband and I and all five of our children are products with Public Schools. We believe in public schools. That said, I think that parents know their children better than anybody else and if a parent says that, you know, a charter school is better because and it's usually for academic reasons to be, it is why students generally would leave the public our public schools and go to a charter school. Maybe they want smaller classrooms or more infinite setting or a specific curriculum. And if a parent were to tell me that that's what's best for their child. I would never second guess that, but I will tell you that if a trustee what were charged with paying attention to and understanding is patterns. And if I see a pattern where we have a lot of Charters attempting to or successfully entering our footprint then as a trustee, I'm going to ask why. Because there has to be a reason for it. Now. We have strengths that Charters will never be able to compete with for example, the extracurricular activities. The charter school is never going to be able to compete with the sports and the Fine Arts that we offer and a lot of times when we see students transition to Charter Schools will come back when they get older because the charter schools just can't compete in that Arena. But as a trustee again, I'm looking for patterns and I'm asking questions about why it's happening and then I'm focusing my efforts on addressing those issues.

Thank you. So, Ms. Weston, we'll go ahead and start the third question with you. Based on the results of the equity task force, data showed that children of color and SPED populations were disproportionately represented in discipline and policy interventions. Please share with us your thoughts on how to reduce this disparity.

I'm really grateful for this question because when I attend board meetings and every year of the TEA data is presented and I see it over and over. I will say that there was a Facebook live event on Council PTA's Facebook page earlier today with Mr. Yarbrough and Ms Grosso, which was very good and it speaks to this. The data is concerning and you know, Ms Grosso and Mr. Yarbrough, they had more than one minute to talk about this than I do, but I will say that the role of the Board of Trustees is to rely on these experts, and I will say after watching that Facebook live where they address, you know training for the behavioral health side as well as the SRO side in our schools. I think those two are forming a really good partnership. I look forward to seeing who we hire as our first Equity officer. And I'm sure that person will you know complete the triad of those three key people that should be looking at this and addressing it and keeping the board posted. And I'm optimistic right now that that data is going to get better because I believe that it should get better and I think that we've got the right place to get there.

Thank You. Ms Griffith, would you like to respond?

Round Rock ISD is already a tremendously diverse school district for students of all races and nationalities. I know that we can always do better. I am concerned with all the data given. That our equity breakdown is not really represented in our surveys, our committees, and our groups throughout our district. And I would look forward to maybe brainstorming to get more diversity in these areas and working with the board and District leadership on that. I feel like we could also bring in some more diverse speakers maybe into our schools and hear their messages and on working together and figuring out you know, what will be what will be best for our our students who are just disproportionately, you know. That what the data shows, I strongly believe in the power of parental involvement as well. So I think that should be a major component of, or that is a major component of

student success and I would love to you know brainstorm again on how to talk more to our families and engage them a little bit more. Thank You.

Thank you. So if you can start us on this question Ms Griffith, What are the thoughts on standardized tests and campus evaluations (including but not limited to STAAR, EOC, PSAT, SAT and ACT) being implemented this year?

Good question. Most people who know me know how I feel about the STAAR test. In fact, our kids have opted out for many years. Test scores should never be the only benchmark of success for students or for teachers. And no student learns the same. No teacher teaches the same. We should expect them all to be graded on one test that's proven to be inefficient. It's not fair to the students or the teachers. It limits teacher's creativity and using their time and fun and creative ways when they feel like they need to teach to a test. As a district we can and we should find additional ways to measure success. As far as the SATs and ACTs this year. I think that it's gonna be a real challenge to get our students up to where they need to be to being super successful in that because they've missed so much learning in class already and we really as a district need to figure out a way to make that better for our students who have lost that educational time in their class with their teachers.

How would you like to reply, Ms Weston?

Well, I will say that accountability is important because the education of our students is important. Texas PTA has long opposed the high stakes aspect of standardized testing and I would say that I am definitely on board with that. I think that that is the right position on this issue because you know again as a trustee where I come at this from how could students benefit from that. You know, my children have taken the STAAR test year after year and I have to tell you that the stress leading up to that, you know, I have to ask myself how am I children's benefiting from that stress? I will tell you that the testing system doesn't need reform. I think that a lot of people in our school district already understand that and are working to address that. As a trustee here, locally, what I would do is I would work hard to educate our community on all of the things that our school districts and our students do well that go beyond a single test on a single day. I would love to advocate and educate about, you know, early College High School. We've got students that come out of their, oh I have the red card. But anyways, I'd like to educate our community on all the things this school does well in China and shine a bright light on it. Thank you.

Thank you. Ms Weston. The community would like to know, with RRISD's diverse community of students and families, how can you ensure the academic, social and emotional needs of all students are represented and considered.

So again, I'm going to reflect back on the Facebook live event today that your organizer or the council PTA streamed live because I learned a lot, and people in our community learned a lot, because they addressed the differences in the different communities and what we're doing to to factor those things in. Amy Grosso highlighted are strong recent recommitment to a relationship with Bluebonnet Trails or the mental health services for our students. That's important that demonstrates a commitment. The social and emotional health, you know addressing that, for all student population is proven, the research shows that our students perform better academically, and they have access to social and emotional education. Thank you.

Thank you, Ms Griffith?

Thanks. Mental health is definitely a major factor in the ability of a child to be successful, both in educational attainment and in their lives in general, especially right now during this uncertain learning arrangement that we have going on. I feel that we haven't made Mental Health a real priority for our students in the past, but I know that our current board has made a great stride and a great commitment and allocating the 1.2 million dollars and mental health services for this year's budget. I would look forward to working with Amy and our amazing Behavioral Health Group to bring more social emotional health programs to our students to help them succeed in all the ways that they need to succeed in our evolving world. Just all of the plans and all of the information that she has out there and the programs that she's making available to our families and our students is amazing. Already and I would look forward to just making that even better for our students.

Okay, Ms. Griffith. We'll start with you after this question. With recent funding of the equity task force, what you believe the priority should be in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusiveness. What programs would you support?

Thanks, and I kind of answered this in my question earlier just talking about how diverse we already are. Bringing in more diverse speakers and programs through Amy and her behavioral health program, I think would be great. Bringing in people who are experts in that in those fields. And having them come and talk to our teachers, our principals, our staff on how they can be better equipped to deal with any sort of inequities that we have in our communities and that they see in our students or our families. I think would be an amazing thing for our, for our districts. I really would just like to see our district, you know continue to be a great, gold standard for districts in the state. You know people move here specifically because of our districts and I would want to do anything that we can so you continue to make it better.

Thank you, Ms Weston. Would you like to answer?

Yes, I want to give credit to Council PTA here for making this a priority, as a candidate issue. What you might not know about me, is that a decade ago, we decided as a family that our children would be transferred to a Round Rock ISD school Title One School some distance from where we live. And for six years we took them to the other part of the community for elementary school so that they could participate in the Dual language programs. My son did not love it but my daughter thrived and she is bilingual. She holds camp in the summer for the neighborhood kids to teach them Spanish. And so when you have children who grew up in one of our Title One campuses, you see the inequities. I've gave a lot of credit to the equity task force. They've already made a lot of recommendations, we've got you know, and actually office repositions that is posted. I look forward to that person getting on board. I think we have a lot of institutional knowledge already in place to make recommendations to the school board, and I look forward to hearing that.

Thank you. Ms Weston. For our seventh question. What is your plan of action to support our most vulnerable students who may drop out before graduating?

Excellent question. So every week the school district posts and enrollment report on the website and I I monitor it, and I will tell you that we were down over 2,000 students since May. Which is a red flag and concerning but not not out of line with what we see in other school districts. One of the things that really

caught my attention was a sharp decline in a moment that success High School. Success High School is a place in Round Rock ISD where the last stop for many students to achieve a high school diploma. And it's concerning to me and I'm eager to learn once I'm elected what strategies we have in place in finding and addressing these students to make sure that no one has left behind or falls through the cracks. I believe we have a sacred obligation to all of our students to see them through the entire K through 12 system at whatever rate works for them, and I this does need to be a priority and I look forward to addressing it.

Thank you. Ms. Griffith, Do you have any thoughts on this?

Yes. We have a lot of resources already in Round Rock ISD that help to work with students who may be falling through the cracks. I guess you should you could say I know that our families and transition program does a lot and our students support specialists who are assigned campuses to work with students specifically with community programs to help them through different things. They do provide all sorts of assistance for the students. That's a couple of services that we provide. I know that our district has so many tools for our teachers and staff to use on a daily basis that have an impact on the students. I would suggest that we use the resources that we have to you know, find out what is what is going on in that student's life to figure out why they would be dropping out and what we can do to help them to be more successful and anything that they do. We just have so many outreach programs that it's there for them to use when they need it.

Thank you. Next we have a question about student involvement in Round Rock ISD decision making. Ms Griffith, what are their thoughts on getting input from teachers and students when making impactful decisions about the district?

All right. Oh gosh, teachers are amazing. Teachers and students are probably the number one person we need to be asking whenever making decisions about things that go on and in schools. Anytime that I think the district is doing something that's a big a big decision or anything like that. We need to talk to our teachers, talk to our principals, talk to our students, do surveys, find out what it is that they want, what it is that they need, what it is that they can go make them more successful and anything that we do. They're the ones you know teachers are the ones who see our students on a daily basis. They're gonna know what's best for them. You know, the principles talk with the teachers, the teachers talk with the students. I feel like if we work together with everyone we can come up with amazing amazing programs and amazing ways to make our school district even better.

Thank you. Ms Weston, Would you like to answer the question?

So this is where this is why I trust you are elected by the community. Because they are charged with representing us and making sure that the voices of students, teachers, parents, are heard. And this is an area of opportunity for our school district. I will tell you that I've taken the liberty of doing the Texas Association of school boards online training program. It's sort of there, you know, preparing for how to be a school board member and they list five different areas that they say of the responsibility of a school board member. I wrote them down. They are governance, high expectations, conditions for Success District accountability, but the one that applies here and that really resonated with me is that trustees are charged with Community engagement. And so I really look forward to encouraging and Communicating to the administration my desire to see more student voices heard and brought in because there was a lot of opportunities to do that and that's our job.

Thank you. Ms Weston, what do you believe your role would be in governance and oversight of the district if you are elected as a school board member?

Can you repeat that?

Yes, what do you believe your role would be in governance and oversight of the district if you are elected as a school board member?

Thank you. Yes, so so the role of a trustee is to obviously represent the community and to hire and evaluate the superintendent, set the superintendent's goals. There's also a requirement to pass an annual budget and then there's the responsibility of studying the tax rate. So these are all governance responsibilities. In addition to that like when I just talked about what the Texas Association of school boards teaches trustees is to also be Advocates and leaders in their communities to make sure that the community's voice is always heard and I will tell you that for me as a trustee again, all of these meetings that I sent that I you know sit in on in person at the district level whether it's on policy or facilities or just a regular school board meeting. I do see where it would be great to really elevate bringing in Community Voices. Thank you.

Thank you. How would you answer, Ms Griffith?

Yeah, the role of the Board of Trustees is is definitely to help the desk help set the destination and the goals of our district. If the goals are not being met then it's their responsibility to work together with our Administration to figure out why. Listening to community members, reading emails, getting feedback from the community from teachers, from principals and working with them collectively is a great way to bring more ideas to the table. To figure out if our goals are not being met then why are they not being met? I mean the community definitely, you know have elected their candidates for a reason. Ultimately. It's not the role of the trustee to do the work of the district but to help set the goals and govern the work that they're doing. I would look to our community and our teachers and our principals to work together to figure out the best possible goals that we need to set and then work on, you know, helping our superintendent and our administration need those goals.

Thank you. For our last question Ms Griffith, Serving over 50,000 students Round Rock. ISD is the 20th largest school district in Texas. As a trustee, how would you ensure that the district is meeting its obligations and responsibilities in the area of environmental sustainability?

Thank you. That's probably something that we do need to work on as a district. I know we don't do very much. We do have recycling programs and things like that. It's definitely something I feel like the district needs to look a little bit more at there's so many different ways that you can that you can help our environment and children love to have different programs like that. So, you know bringing in some different programs whether it's solar, whether it's recycling and in the lunchroom recycling in the classrooms, there's so many different environmentally protection programs out there for students. I feel like we can easily form some sort of committee to help find these programs and implement them in our schools and it would make a huge difference. I feel like not only to our budget but maybe to what our students are learning and have them go forward and being environmentally friendly, you know in their own lives as they grow up and become adults themselves and have their families continue the good practices that they've learned in our schools.

Thank you. Ms Weston, Would you like to respond to the last question?

Yes, and I'm really glad that this question was asked because I've been in board meeting after board meeting where we actually I got a group of parents already in our school district who have organized. I forget exactly what they call themselves that it's something about, you know, environmental sustainability and they come to the microphone regularly during public comments and they offer specific solutions. You know, the foam trays at lunch going into trash every day comes to mind but they've also offered other specific recommendations. So this is a situation where I don't think there's really a lot of work in front of us or the additional committees that need to be formed. I think we already have great people and parents advocating and communicating what we can do to make progress on this. And I'll just end this by saying our family really enjoys doing a lot of things with gardening and composting and recycling, but when I worked in a private sector as a business leader at an engineering firm, we really provided ourselves on the LEED certification of our engineers to make the buildings we were designing environmental friendly. Thank you.

Thank you candidates for answering those tough questions from across our learning communities. We're now going to have a minute and a half for your closing statements. We're going to hold up the same yellow card at 30 seconds remaining. And the red card to ask you to stop. We're going to start with Ms Weston. Ms Weston. You get the first closing statement.

Okay. Thank you. So thanks to council PTA, the moderator, and my opponent for a great forum. Today is my birthday. So it's been a great beginning and end to the day for me. I think we have a lot of great candidates who have stepped forward to serve. I mean think about it. We have five educators or maybe it's six two phds many active volunteers, folks who have served in our country in uniform and many parents, truly a great group of candidates. I am a proven servant leader and have prepared to live up to the high expectations of our community. And I'd like to speak to the P in PTA. Speaking from my own family experience, I know that parenting is not a success only Journey. And I won't get everything right? But I will hear your frustrations and fears and I will advocate for our students. We need to look up and ahead and emerging from this pandemic stronger has got to be a priority. For some students and teachers that's best to continue the online learning platform as it's safest for them and it's working. For many of our students, Equitable education can only come from the world-class facilities and in-person teachers that our community has invested in for a long time. Ensuring that our students and teachers recover socially, emotionally and academically from our campuses being closed for months. It's going to require tremendous leadership and I am ready for that challenge. Thanks again for a great Forum. I asked for your vote for Place 7.

Thank you. Ms. Weston. Ms. Griffith, would you like to close?

Thank you. Yes. Thank you to the council for having these forums and for all the candidates who have stepped forward to run to serve our amazing district. And they get to the community for asking such great questions. I really just want to say that we live in such an amazing community and our schools really are a testament to just how awesome it is here. There are people from all over that move here just because of the Round Rock ISD name. Because we are known throughout as being amazing. Having served in our schools for over 14 years. I just have to say we truly are a destination district and I absolutely love our schools. We've always loved everything about our schools and I just want to. I'm super proud of what we have to offer our students. And I want to see all students succeed, not just my

own and I want to see great Partnerships between our local businesses where things like our CTE program can grow and flourish. I want to see more parents get involved in their PTAs and their booster clubs. I want to see us continue to just get better and better every single year. My commitment is to work with the board and the administration and our leaders to create goals that will make that happen. I want to see us continue to be an amazing community that people want to move to and it brings in people from everywhere because we are just the number one place to be, the number one place, the number one school district. I want to see our kids get back in school with their teachers where they want to be where the teachers love them. So please vote for me Jenn Griffith, Place Seven. Thank you.

Thank you to our willing candidates Ms Griffith and Ms. Weston for their participation in this voter event. The PTA applauds your willingness to serve the community, schools, parents, teachers, administrators, and students of Round Rock ISD. Please remember that early voting starts on Tuesday, October 13th. And election day is Tuesday, November 3rd. This forum will be posted on the Round Rock Council of PTA's website rrisdpta.org. That's RRISDPTA.ORG. and on the social media along with the other place forums as they occur. Candidate bio information will also be posted and following the forums the candidates will have the opportunity to answer those questions posed to the other place forums in written form. Please stay tuned for Place six Forum at 7 pm. Thank you and good night.