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OPINION

The State endorsement: Our four choices for Richland 1 school board

BY THE STATE EDITORIAL BOARD
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The State Editorial Board is endorsing four candidates for the Richland 1 school board in the Nov. 5 election. TRACY GLANTZ tglantz@thestate.com



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Voters in the Richland 1 school district have a stark choice in the Nov. 5 election about the direction and leadership of their [seven-member school board](#): Accept the status quo or end it.

With more than 22,000 students, more than 1,750 teachers and 48 schools in and around Columbia, [this Richland County district](#) has an annual budget of [\\$409 million](#) and can't stop mismanaging money. The district was placed on state "fiscal watch" in December 2022 following [misuse of procurement cards](#) and that censure was elevated to "fiscal caution" in August after an [Inspector General investigation](#) found Richland 1 broke the law and cost taxpayers more than \$350,000 when it began building an early learning center without the proper permits. The board also violated public-meeting laws with two secretive votes on the \$31 million project.

The project has been bungled so badly that state Superintendent of Education Ellen Weaver [told the board](#) in August her "strong and considered recommendation" was to "fully decommission" it. That wasn't the first time the district caught her attention. Weaver also [criticized it](#) last year for sudden, mid-year teacher school reassignments with little notice that were widely condemned.

Richland 1 has also struggled to prepare students for college and careers. The percentage of students in the graduating class deemed college or career ready has languished between 55% and 60% over the [last three years](#), meaning four out of 10 are not ready. Barely 1 in 5 students in the graduation cohort were considered college *and* career ready last year. Both figures are well below state averages.

It's time for voters to send a clear message and restore trust in this school district. The State Editorial Board endorses voting against all four incumbents and for Angela

Brown, Richard Moore, Steven Diaz and Ericka Roberson Hursey in Richland 1.

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Brown and Moore are challenging first-term incumbents Angela Clyburn and Tamika Myers for two at-large seats. Myers ignored repeated interview requests. She was the only one of 11 Richland 1 school board candidates who did not respond to our six-question survey.

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We endorse Angela Brown because she showed the deepest understanding and appreciation of public education among anyone in the race. She followed 17 years as a teacher with 18 years as an administrator in the district. Her top priorities are student achievement, communication and transparency, and she said she'd scrutinize the early learning center project and the state's cease-and-desist order and focus on minimizing expenses and restoring trust.

We also endorse Richard Moore. His priorities are student achievement, and recruiting, developing and retaining high-quality teachers and school

administrators. We thought his inclusion of development in a discussion about recruitment and retention showed nuance. He also said the superintendent should change “strategies or actions, drastically and soon, in order to stay.” We don’t make a judgment on the administration, but the new board should meet to discuss its priorities and policies, and Moore’s skepticism is welcome. He noted, “It is never effective to keep doing the same thing over and over when it is not producing the desired result.”

The four candidates seeking the District 2 seat include incumbent Jamie Devine. A former president of the South Carolina School Boards Association, Devine has served on the board since 2008. He answered our questions holistically, but disagreed with our characterization of the early learning center construction saga as a “fiasco.” He also pushed back on the Inspector General’s findings, saying other school districts had advanced construction projects without a formal permit. He did pledge to ensure that the district will seek “necessary permits for future projects.” But Devine has already had a chance to ensure the district follows the law. It didn’t.

We think Steven Diaz should replace him. A financial adviser, a Marine Corps veteran, a Purple Heart recipient and a first-generation American with a child in the district, Diaz’s priorities are fiscal responsibility, educational excellence and putting kids first. He said he’d push for an audit of the early learning center, for regular public updates on it and for safeguards to prevent additional mistakes. He also wants to create a citizen oversight committee for input on other financial matters.

That leaves the District 4 race, notable because candidate Ericka Roberson Hursey previously filed a [lawsuit](#) against Richland 1 and the other person in the race, incumbent Cheryl Hinton-Harris, over claims of free speech violations and breach of contract and allegations of defamation by Hinton-Harris. Hursey is a longtime Richland 1 teacher and the former principal of Lower Richland High School whose suit alleges she was removed as principal in retaliation for a speech she gave at a high school graduation in 2022. We’ll let the legal system settle [that dispute](#), but we believe Hursey is the better choice for the school board. Hinton-Harris, first elected in 2012, gave only brief replies in our survey, and none were persuasive. Hursey’s answers were more detailed, thoughtful and thorough. She has more than 28 years of experience in education. We recommend Hursey over Hinton-Harris.

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