

**MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
VALPARAISO, INDIANA
SCHOOL BOARD APPOINTMENT INTERVIEWS
May 5, 2025**

The Common Council of the City of Valparaiso, Indiana, met in special session on Monday, May 5, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. in City Hall. Attorney Patrick Lyp took roll call. Present were Councilmembers Reed, Cotton, Domer, Pupillo, Anderson, Hunt, and Kapitan. Attorney Lyp advised tonight the four finalists are present. Finalists are: Ron Donahue, Brett Miller, Curtiss Strietelmeier, and Erika Watkins. This is the first of two rounds of questions. Tonight's questions were submitted by the public. The second round of questions will be presented on May 21st. Each will be given one minute and 30 seconds to respond. Each applicant was given two minutes to introduce themselves.

Q 1 – What is the role of a school board member?

Brett Miller – The most important is the students, faculty, and retaining those teachers and the community. There should be a goal to advocate for students. Board members are responsible for hiring the superintendent and allow the superintendent to run the school with the administrators on a day to day basis. His recommendations will come from the superintendent.

Ron Donahue – It is to hire the superintendent and deal with the oversight process. It is also to be a representative of the community. He has been on other boards. A lot of times people bring reports and you make decisions. It is not as engaging as this is. This is one of the most important boards in the community. They are forming the next generation. It is important for everyone to come back to the area. It is important to experience the decisions the Board makes. He feels it is critical to have kids in the school system. It is good for the kids to see there is a Board and they care.

Erika Watkins – The role of a school board member has evolved from what she initially thought it was. It is a collaboration of the other members and listening to their perspectives. The Board sets policy and goes over budgets. The Board is student driven. It is about hearing the heart and voice of the community as they are making decisions. That is difficult to do if you are not fully involved in making the decisions. The person who serves as superintendent has gone to school. They are well educated. But the Board needs to listen to the community to make decisions.

Curtiss Strietelmier – School Board members hire the superintendent. They set policies and procedures. They are responsible for fiscal matters. They check the budget. Beyond that they are an advocate for the school system. They are communicators and work within the community. They are partners with the community and partners with the administrative staff and teachers to make certain the students have the best experience possible and to make sure they have the resources available to be successful. A school board member should be able to sit down and ask what is working well.

Q 2 – What is the goal of a public education system? As a board member, how do you see yourself advancing those goals?

Erika Watkins – The goal is to provide equitable access to high quality learning opportunities. Public schools have the responsibility to make sure every child's needs are met. And it's not based off their background or social economic status. Public schools are the reason she came here. They could not afford private school settings. The reason she brought her family here is the reason people pick Valparaiso. Because we have great public schools. Public schools meet every need.

Brett Miller - The goal of the education system is to educate students. You need to foster them. They need to be well rounded and have the ability to be critical thinkers. They need to be able to grow in a safe environment. They need to be able to go to college, career trade school or into the workforce. We need to be looking at all levels of children.

Curtiss Strietelmier – The Board wants to make sure the students have opportunities and the ability to cultivate that. As an educator they need to know how they can go beyond and help them realize how to be better. This is all key to what a public education system is. It is giving someone an opportunity and then helping them raise their skill set. The Board needs to make sure the funding follows the goals. Make sure the people hired believe the same thing. As a Board that is key for them. Put the money where they know it is important and where it has the greatest impact on students. Make sure the staff are the best people they can hire.

Ron Donahue – It is preparing the kids for their future. In large part that is academic. But there are a lot of other things like the arts. The teachers are what make the school. Make sure they have the tools they need. They affect the kids more than the curriculum. They should be looking at finances all the time. Not just when they have to make a budget. They need to challenge themselves. The kids need to be prepared for their career path no matter what it is.

Q 3- What is the best way to evaluate our schools?

Curtiss Strietelmier – We need to look at academic performance. School climate and culture. Are the kids safe and secure? Those are things we can measure. If you want to know if you are a successful school – are kids staying there? Do they want to be part of that community? Are parents involved? Do you hear from that graduate three or four years later? To really know if your school is successful do people feel empowered by what you provide them? Do the kids that have gone through want to come back and teach there? Say I want to have my kids go there. If you can do all of these things, that is how you know you have the best school.

Ron Donahue - To be successful you have to have data driven results. There is a lot more to that. Retention of teachers and staff. Are they attracting new talent? How many parents are turning out for PTO meetings or kindergarten roundup. There is a huge network of people that do not know what the school system does every day. It is the Board's job to engage them. There are a lot of untapped resources out there. There are a lot of ways to make the school system better by just using the parents. Having students come back to the area is huge. Figuring out retention is big.

Erika Watkins – We know there is data we can measure. It is about relationships. Businesses can do well with word of mouth. With relationships that have been established. If people are happy, they stay. If they stay, they tell people about how great Valparaiso is. That brings more people to our community. That is a great way to evaluate our schools. People will ask how the children are doing. If they are doing well, it is clear the community is well. People will stay if they have great relationships. We won't have to worry about losing our students to other school systems or voucher programs.

Brett Miller – He agrees with all that has been said. The norms are standardized testing. There are graduation rates, the dropout rates, the data every school looks at to determine how to evaluate themselves. He came here 20 years ago. Memorial ended up becoming a blue-ribbon school. That didn't happen overnight. He attributed that to Mr. Case. He also looked at the teachers they were able to retain and have that type of excellence in a small school that was outdated and needed to be updated at the time. He is a horrible standardized tester. He does not want to base things on data. He is concerned about students transferring out. In 2021 it was 391. As of this current school year it is 674 students. That equates to about \$4.7 Million Dollars. He wants to do exit interviews. Why are they leaving and what can we do to get them back?

Q 4 - In what ways do you ensure that your personal objectives and priorities are aligned with the established goals and strategic vision of the VCS school board and its superintendent?

Ron Donahue – He thinks their role is to question things and challenge new ideas. His goal would be to bring up ideas. Maybe things that are different from the norm. Being an effective Board member is not just about showing up but understanding the process. And respectfully challenging why are we doing this. This is something we should talk about at every meeting with every teacher. We need to bring our viewpoints together and discuss what the options are. There needs to be trust and a solid relationship with the superintendent. Their role is to look at everything. Maybe they need to adjust the goal.

Erika Watkins – She has made some adjustments sitting on the Board. Jim McCall often talks about his four pillars: altruism, athletics, academics and attendance. She believes students should be well rounded when they go out into the community. That looks a lot like who she is and the goals she has set. She believes the value of working alongside the superintendent and board members is getting to know each other and what the “whys” are and know what the interests are and be as impactful as we can to the student body that we are servicing.

Brett Miller – Personal priorities and objectives should not be a factor when making decisions on the School Board. Personal and professional experience play a role in a board member's determinations. It is okay to disagree. Those conversations need to happen when you are working in regard to looking at policies, determining policies and amending policies. For VCS to maintain trust with its stakeholders, the Board needs to look at their decisions and how they critique them and how stakeholders look at them. That is something that is going to be questioned through current and proposed policy. It is also going to be how we look at funding cuts down the road. The mission focuses on a safe, supportive environment where students and

staff can strive for personal growth and develop key character traits like critical thinking, compassion, integrity and perseverance. Their vision highlights the future of VCS and empowers students to become lifelong learners and active members of their community through education, exploration and access to opportunities. Everyone here is committed to that vision and that mission.

Curtiss Strietelmier - He would not be here if he did not believe in the vision and mission of VCS. He could not put his time and effort into something he did not agree with. Empowering every child is what he prefers to do with every child he works with. He has been a superintendent, teacher and coach. If he didn't believe in the power of working with students to make sure they can be successful he would not be here. It is natural. He questions why someone would want to be part of something if their goals do not align.

Q 5 – Serving on the school board comes with a learning curve – how do you plan to get up to speed and what resources will you use? How do you approach learning and making informed decisions when you're unfamiliar with a topic – whether it's school funding, facilities planning, or curriculum review? And what resources would you use?

Erika Watkins – She has gone to Board members and the superintendent. She goes to people who know when she does not. That is the beauty of networking. You surround yourself with people who are familiar with the information you ask for. The Indiana School Board Association sends out emails every day. It is full of information and guidelines. There are resources throughout the ISBA that will guide you if there is something you are unfamiliar with. Educators say there are no dumb questions. So if there is something I don't know, I go and ask.

Curtiss Strietelmier – He would start by looking at past school board minutes. What has been done in the past. What have people talked about in the past? He would also review the public documents that go with whatever subject they are talking about. He has multiple years of experience but things change. The school board association is an incredible resource. Talk to school board members and get their feedback. Also talk to administrators and Dr. McCall. Part of the learning curve is you have to be willing to ask.

Ron Donahue – He agrees with what has been said. The publications, minutes, videos are online. But above all, talking to people and talking from every perspective, from the stakeholder to the teachers, to the parents. It is important to weed through misinformation and see what is affecting and who it is affecting. You need to learn both sides before making an opinion. Their job is to make sure they look at a situation from all angles and make their own decisions.

Brett Miller – He regularly attends school board meetings. He expects there to be a learning curve. You have to go to your resources. If you are unfamiliar with something, go to someone who is going to have that information. There is no such thing as a stupid question. He will ask questions until he annoys but if it is something he wants to learn and needs to learn, he is going to do that. It is going to make him a better person. In his prior job he had to go through a four-year process of accreditation. He learned in that process and interviewed people. It made him a better person and allowed him to understand that.

Q 6 – What is your understanding of how public schools in Indiana are funded, and how recent legislative changes have impacted that?

Ron Donahue – I’m assuming this has to do with charter schools and property tax. This relates back to building the best product that we can build. They can go other places and we will lose funding from that. As long as we are taking every step we can to fulfill the needs and the parents and community are heard, that is our role. There will always be outside forces but we need to focus on our job and our responsibilities and our kids. We have to figure out why people are leaving for charter schools and change that. We are not going to be able to fix everything. The Board needs to be a resource for those who do not understand an issue.

Brett Miller - Things are going to be changed dramatically under Governor Braun. He understands this is going to be a mixture of state, local and property taxes. Federal agencies do kick in at some point. The largest revenue portion is from property taxes. His concern is how does that affect VCS. Does that look at a reduction in funding? How is it going to impact the public schools? SB1 is going to allow funding to be shared with charter schools and private schools. VCS is going to lose millions of dollars. It is looking at what we are doing well and why we are not investing further into that. We have to look at the students transferring in and out and how that’s going to be impacted.

Curtiss Strietelmier – Public schools are funded by three different resources and each is going through legislative impacts. At the Federal level there is discussion and confusion. Most schools will be impacted around 10%. In Valpo it will have to be looked at to see how it is going to impact and how they support the at-risk students or special needs students. They are taking a hit at the State level with open vouchers. The local level is traditionally where they receive most of the funding. All three funding sources have a lot going on. We might not know how we will be impacted for a year or two until it is all in place.

Erika Watkins – The time is now to work together. If we keep students in our buildings, the money follows. We cannot afford to lose any more students. We need to get back the 600 we lost. We know that is going to drive the financial resources in the school system. That is the greater impact. We won’t feel the impact for another year or two. Especially when we are sitting on a \$10 Million Dollar Rainy Day Fund. It will deplete quickly if we don’t have something set in concrete that is going to protect all of us.

Q 7 – In the school year 2024-2025, the Valparaiso Community Schools lost just over \$3 M dollars to the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program. Since the 2017-2018 school year the total lost from our district’s share of the basic grant has been close to \$14M dollars. Describe your position on public funding for charter and voucher schools. Data source: Dr. Pil Downs, “Voucher Impact,” 2017 to 2024 <https://drphildowns.com/>

Curtiss Strietelmier – He would like to say get rid of them. We don’t need or want them. They take away from our public schools. There may be times when it is the best for the student. If we truly care about student success and opportunity, we may have to set back and say it is worthwhile for some students to have vouchers. With the current policy there is no requirement for the child to be in a public school. They can go straight to the private school. There no longer

is a cap on income for the family so anybody can go. So now we are supplementing private schools with public school funding. Vouchers can be good for the right student at the right time. He thinks the way we are going it as a State is wrong.

Brett Miller - He agrees with that. His opinion regarding public school funding for a charter or voucher school is really largely irrelevant. The policy is made by legislators that we have no control over. What matters is how we navigate this and how we look at how we ride the ship through this storm. This is going to put a strain on public education. In the 2021 school year VCS lost roughly 674 students. They need to find out why these students are leaving and why they are not giving Valpo schools the opportunity. They are just going straight to a private school. The Board cannot change legislative decisions. They have to respond and mitigate around that and try to hamper as minimal revenue loses as humanly possible. We need to educate the taxpayers. They need to be aware of the impacts that legislative decisions can make on Valpo schools as well as Valpo's taxpayers.

Erika Watkins – Education is key. Educate the public on public schools and voucher dollars and what that impact means to us as a community. It is difficult to compare how well those schools are performing and the public schools are performing. They do not have the same regulations and rules as the public schools. At that point fairness is no longer evident. When she lived in Portage her children did attend a charter school because of convenience. Then she learned about the impact and when she moved to Valparaiso she needed to invest in the community. That means putting her children in public schools and allowing that dollar to enrich the community. This is why we need to champion and be out legislatively speaking loudly and clearly as to how and why legislation should move in favor of public schools.

Ron Donahue – He agrees with the legislative part. They have an obligation to let people know downstate and federally how the decisions are impacting. We need to take that to parents and teachers. There are lots of different angles on this. There might be certain children's needs or various things where this is beneficial. We still need to build the best we can and it is important to understand why any family leaves. We need to know the top ten reasons people are leaving and address those. Let's fill those gaps first.

Q 8 – According to the state DOE's annual school transfer report, VCS is losing students and with it public education funding. If appointed, would you favor an independent inquiry into both why VCS is losing students and ways in which to reverse that loss?

Erika Watkins – She believes there is good from letting someone from the outside see what is happening inside. Sometimes we may be biased as to what we think and believe. There are times when someone else can come in and see where there is help needed. We may overlook it because we are in it. There may be a need for an independent company to come in and look at it. It shouldn't work solely independently because they need to hear the voice of what is already here. Whatever is best for our community.

Ron Donahue – He doesn't know the specifics of what the independent survey would be but we need to know what the problems are before we can start to fix them. He agrees looking internally you don't see it or have blinders on. Or you might have someone who is part of the

problem but not admitting to it. If this is a path to uncover where we can do better for our kids and families, then pursue it. Don't put blinders on. There are issues that affect our kids. There's bullying, racism and drugs. Our schools are great but we don't want things to get worse. He has someone going into middle school. He wants this fixed. It will be uncomfortable. But if we don't how many kids are we going to lose. It will be the whole community dealing with it together.

Curtiss Strietelmier – He has no problem with an outside agency looking at anything they do. If you want to show the community you are transparent then you bring in outside voices. If all you are doing is keeping that internal you may miss something that is obvious to somebody from outside. Bring someone in. It will boil down to a couple of things. Kids need opportunity. They need someplace to do what they want to do. They need some place where they will feel safe and respected. He supports bringing someone in to look at every part of the school district. Let's figure out where we can do better.

Brett Miller – Absolutely. He looks at this in regard to the transfer report. We need to look at an exit interview. We need to ask brutally honest questions. Why are you leaving? Why is the grass greener and why are you choosing to go that route? We may not like the answers. They need to look at SB1 and the ramifications that are going to be down the road. You learn from this and you gather that information and move forward. News Room Quote – The first step to solving a problem is recognizing there is one. We need to recognize how we find the solution.

Q 9 – Given the legislature's decision to cut funding resulting in the loss of approximately \$2,000,000 a year over the next 3 years to VCS, would you favor reducing administration size before any cuts were made to faculty and staff throughout the system?

Curtiss Strietelmier – The last cut you want to make is the one closest to the student. If you can avoid making a cut to an aid or teacher you do it. There are times when cutting the student to keep an administrator may be necessary. You may have an administrator who is responsible for discipline at a school. If you get rid of the administrator, the discipline may drop at that school. It is not a black and white answer. The right answer is going to be what is the most impactful for students. What is going to make sure that most students have the chance to be successful in the location they are at? If all things are equal then the administrator is first. You always want the contact that is closest to the student stay with the student.

Brett Miller – He agrees with everything Curtiss has said. Typically, the first person caught in workforce reduction is administrative staff. He is not for that. He wants to look at the hard numbers and exhaust everything humanely possible to the point where we don't have to get to that. And if it gets to reduction, he wants to look at the individuals. He would look at early retirement or do a buyout.

Erika Watkins – How can we create balance without having to disrupt what we have become accustomed to as a community. Curtiss said it well. You get rid of someone who is responsible for behavioral support and then you have an increase in those numbers. How can we create balance by making sure that our students and the administrative staff are well? She hopes it does not get to that. She is optimistic. Relationships matter. Are there teachers in the classroom who

could handle some of the administrative work? Are there administrators who would go into the classroom? It is going to have an impact.

Ron Donahue – He thinks it is a combination of all three. Moving people around. He doesn't like to wait until there is a threat. He thinks this is something that should be constantly looked at with everyone involved so there is no surprise. They can see the trend. There is a lot of responsibility sharing. There is not a silver bullet to this. They need to be responsible and respectful to the staff however this goes.

Q 10 – The board's actions in the next four years will affect whether the school corporation mounts a new referendum on Nov. 5, 2030, against shortfalls in state education funding. What actions will you initiate to ensure the district lives within its state granted budgets?

Erika Watkins – That "R" word is not one that most people want to hear. She has only worked on one referendum. She gives Jim McCall a lot of credit. He is already processing what that looks like and communicating with the board. No one wants to hear Referendum but when you are up against State dollars, SB 1, having to do more with less – How do you make a dollar out of \$0.15? Her hope is the Board looks at the dollars. Look at what we will lose if any. Keep the students in their seats. Keep the families in the community. Continue to support the public schools.

Ron Donahue – All of these recent questions seem to be the same – How are we going to do more with less. He doesn't know if the public understands all the things we face. As a parent he has never gotten a survey. We can develop processes and be reactionary to the different taxes. Working together as a community is going to be our guiding light through a lot of this.

Curtiss Strietelmier – If your funding aligns with your goals and you're making sure you're doing the things that are best for students, you should be able to find ways to make the dollars work. If not, then we have a discussion about a referendum. First, we need to determine what is important and put the money there first. We talked about a third party looking at us. Let's open up that transparency. Let's make sure when we go to the community we can say we have done everything. We have taken every dollar we can. We have talked to every child who's left this district to see why they are leaving so we can make sure we are doing things better. We brought somebody in from the outside to really look at what we are doing and see if there is financially a better way to do it. Then that is when you can have the discussion about a referendum.

Brett Miller - The reality of staying in budget is going to be difficult. He looks at what the school board has done in their outside the box thinking. The solar canopies at TJ Middle School, the LED lighting, the infrastructure. All those changes are saving the school money. There are things the Board has done and is doing to impact and cut costs. The concern will be a year after SB 1 when we have had a year or two to see where the numbers lie and how things look. The last thing a school corporation wants to do is a referendum. You have to look at the legislators. In 2028 look at Governor Braun and Ed Soliday. They are the legislators that passed these bills and accepted them.

Q 11 – What are your thoughts about a Valparaiso Community Schools Board Member sending their children to private or charter school?

Curtiss Strietelmier – He needs to understand why they are doing that . There may be a valid reason. He doesn't want to hold it against someone. If a member is not investing in the school with their own student, then how is an outside community member going to trust you are making the best decision for the students that are there? I don't have a problem if they have a good reason. But it better be a good reason otherwise I feel they should have their child in our system.

Erika Watkins – Her answer is like Curtiss. There has to be a reason. When she first moved to Valparaiso her children were in charter. It was November and we waited for them to finish that school year before she brought them into VCS. If you believe in Valparaiso, invest in Valparaiso. If you are going to be a school board member for a public school, invest in the school system. Out of the heart, the mouth speaks. If your heart is not in the work we are doing, that is concerning.

Brett Miller - If there was a specific reason why VCS could not accommodate the needs of that specific child, he would understand that. If you are looking at a charter or private school and there is no reason why VCS cannot accommodate you, at that point he does not know why they are on the school board. It makes no sense. He is a firm believer that if you are going to be on this board, your children should have either gone through the VCS system or currently be in the VCS.

Ron Donahue – He thinks it should be a necessity. In order to see the changes the Board is making they need to have kids here. They need to see the impact. There are valid reasons for charter schools. But you are not going to be an effective school board member if you are not all in. When it comes to referendum taxpayers will ask what we did. Did we do our best? If you don't have kids here you are a spectator. Board members need to be involved. If you are not actively involved, you are not going to come to the table with all the information that those of us who have kid are living with and seeing every day. He thinks it is a high requirement that all Board members have kids actively in the school system.

Q 12 – Please Share your approach to working with a superintendent - particularly how you'd maintain oversight while also giving them the space and trust to lead effectively?

Brett Miller – The Board oversees the appointments of the superintendent. They oversee his contract and whether it's extended. He believes the Board trusts Dr. McCall and gives him the appropriate space. His biggest frustration is when a student goes before Dr. McCall three times last year and eloquently explained her concerns and questions. There was never an answer publicly in a school board meeting format. The only response she ever got was from Erika. If you are the superintendent of the school you advocate for every child. Over the last 20 years he has seen a lack of transparency. As a future board member his concern is that he wants the students' concerns addressed. He wants this to be transparent. He wants them to be heard and ultimately know there was a decision rendered.

Curtiss Strietelmier – The superintendent has the greatest responsibility in the school district. They have to have flexibility and the freedom to do so. The Board has given them that responsibility. The Board is trusting him to lead them. The last thing he needs is to have me constantly in his ear with questions and emails. We have given him that trust. We evaluate as a team. Here is your rubric. Here's what we were talking about. Here's what we expected from you. Here's what we need done. Let's have that discussion. If you don't trust him, why is he in charge? From an evaluation standpoint it needs to be done as a team.

Ron Donahue – We talked about being the liaison to the community. Sometimes it is good to hear that feedback. The Board's role is to offer opportunities and perspectives. Take a minute to hear how that might be perceived by one student. If it is one student, it probably is 100 students. Then that gets back to the root of transparency.

Erika Watkins - One thing she has learned is follow up. She has watched Ashley and learned from her. If the question was public, do they give a public response. Or can they send an email. She has realized that since one person thought of it, maybe others are thinking of it too and it should be a public response. We are working for the community. It is not about us. If the questions are asked openly then maybe they should reply openly.

Q 13 – How do you define transparency in public service?

Ron Donahue – A lot of it is follow up. Even if the person doesn't like your response, they still know where you stand. Coming out to events – kindergarten roundup or PTO are huge for people to let them know that we are there with them. Students don't perceive that board members are around the school system. There needs to be more of a presence. Then when we make decisions everyone knows that we understand and have seen what is happening. Sharing the surveys is a good thing. With a quick survey and sharing those results they could get some immediate feedback over the summer or even into the fall. The school board meetings should rotate buildings and times. You have to build transparency.

Brett Miller – Transparency is open and honest communication. If you are getting constructive criticism, you're getting feedback and it is communication. If we are going to talk about a referendum down the road, we need to be transparent. At some point the public is going to want to know why we are in the shape we are in. We can't hide and hold out and not respond. There has to be respect for the community and giving them the ability to have the opportunity to receive feedback. At some school board meetings there's a hot button issue. There's mutiny on the bounty and there's a pink elephant in the room. Everyone knows where it is but nobody is addressing the pink elephant. Maybe every quarter meet at a different place. Give parents a place to be able to voice their concerns.

Erika Watkins – Transparency is being open and honest. It can hurt sometimes. You want to meet everyone's needs. That is difficult. You are not going to make everyone happy. You are going to come up against people that no matter how transparent you are, they still are not going to be satisfied. Transparency can hurt but it is necessary. The more it appears we are hiding, it makes the community not trust our endeavors. Sometimes we hold on to information because we think we are safeguarding a situation. We serve in these capacities because we care about the

audience we serve and that is the students. It is the parents they are opening themselves up to no matter what we do or how we do it. It is being as open and honest as we can.

Curtiss Strietelmier – Transparency is trust. Do I trust what you're saying to me is accurate? Are you open with me? Are you honest with what you are saying? Are you going to hold yourself accountable for the information you gave me? When you talk to me, can I understand what you are saying to me? As a public figure that is what he is trying to do. Do you believe every one of us up here really think and feel what we are telling you we feel? When you come to me with a question about finances, curriculum, student behavior, student needs is the answer I am giving you an honest answer. Can I go back and look at the information you provided. Is there something I can put that against that will say that is the case? If you take out the word transparent and replace it with trust you have met the burden.

Q 14 – Does the school district do a sufficient job of informing Valparaiso residents of the news and happenings in the schools? As an individual board member, what will you do to ensure the administration communicates well and fully?

Brett Miller – He believes it is getting better. He is a firm believer in always improving communication. If you tell him you are the best communicator in the world, he is going to tell you that you are full of it because you are not. You have to communicate. His house is where all the kids went when there was a snow day or e-learning day. Parents want to be informed because they have a life. They just want to be able to understand what you have to do if a school is going to close for the day. This question fits with the impact of not being aware of what's really kind of going on in the schools. He would advocate to improve communication. He thinks the Viking Connect is working. For school closures he would like to look at what other schools in Porter County are doing and see if it makes more sense or is a better fit.

Erika Watkins – We can do better. If you don't put information out first, the community gets to make up what they think. Many times they may get it wrong. If we don't get it out first, they can contain it or twist it. The rally has been what could we have done differently. Do we need to go back and continue that conversation, yes. She is not sure if social media is the place to be. But we have to Be Valpo right or wrong. If we put information out first, then we get to take credit for it.

Curtiss Strietelmier – He loves the idea of the Board gets information out first. From an individual standpoint, he thinks the schools are doing a good job with the Viking Connect. Some people want more and some want less. It is a hard call to make. You can always use more information. There are great things like Viking View. Somebody brought up communication at the Board meetings could be better. As a Board member he would be available. Board members need to be out there sharing what is going on in schools. Let the public help you stay informed.

Ron Donahue – Getting ahead of something controversial or a problem is a must. Also talking about the smaller sport can go a long way. That would mean a lot to someone who is not in the mainstream sports. Over the winter he went to a play at the school. There was an older couple there. They did not have kids in the school system. They were just there because they heard about it. A quarterly newsletter should go out. The school does not publish when the school

board meetings are. That could be sent out on Viking Connect. Little things can go a long way. It is not money it is tools we already have. PTO is a huge market to tap. They would do great things for the school system.

Q 1 – What role do you believe public input should play in board decision-making, and how would you incorporate community voices while still upholding board responsibilities?

Erika Watkins – There is a section on the agenda that allows for open comments. It would be great to hold town hall meetings and allow the community to be able to share more. When the Board makes decisions, it is ultimately for the community. It would be great to hear more public input. She wishes they had a bigger room. When you build small you expect small. When you build large, you are expecting the majority of the community to come out. It is unfortunate when the public does not know and they find out by the aftermath. That is when they say they wish they would have known. Having town halls and hearing the voices of the community would allow the Board to make decisions that are more reflective of the community and not ourselves.

Curtiss Strietelmier – The more feedback the board can get from the community, the better. Being appointed rather than being elected puts more responsibility on them to go out and find that information. Elected they can say that we are not doing what we need to do and they will elect someone new. He needs to make sure he is following through. He loves the idea of the monthly or quarterly town halls. Surveys are good if it is something the community cares about. Whenever you can, take advantage of public forum. There has to be give and take with the Board members and being heard at the meetings. To be successful the Board has to take information from the community and utilize it to the best they can to make decisions.

Brett Miller – This is about transparency again. Dr. Frataccia listened to public input. There were town halls. There were meetings at the high school. These were input meetings. The community has to be actively engaged. He would like the Board to go back to some type of community engagement. Something where parents can get out. Doing the meetings at times that are conducive for parents. As a school board member he wants the students, the faculty and community to be heard. Everyone needs a seat at the table. When they are looking at a possible referendum in 2030 due to SB1, there has to be public input. It is going to be more palatable to say what they have done over the last five years rather than saying – we are doing a referendum.

Ron Donahue – Public input should be almost solely how they make their decisions based upon what our kids and our families need. He loves the quarterly meeting ideas. They should look at different sessions for them. When parents say what their top things are, then offer a program. This way they can find out what the parents think and what the kids think. His assumption is that attendance at school board meetings is pretty low. There is a lot that can be done that will be impactful to students.

Q 16 – How do you maintain objectivity and public trust when making decisions that may involve people you know or have worked with personally?

Brett Miller – He was a risk manager for a 74-bed mental health residential facility. The risk manager is the moral and ethical compass for the building. It is the person that objectively has to

be neutral. There were times when he had to sit across from people he knew well and wonder what they were doing, and be that moral compass. It has helped him over the last six or seven years to become a stronger clinician. When the Board is looking at making decisions, they have to use wise judgement.

Ron Donahue – Dealing with the facts and data is what has to be done in any sort of a decision or disciplinary action. The person you are dealing with may not like the conversation but if they think you are fair and consistent, that is the message we need to send with people. We will come across those every day in our daily lives. As long as the person understands that this is the situation This is what occurred. And here's what the outcome is going to be. Most of the time people are going to respect that. They may not like you or the school board but if it's laid out to them that they clearly understand what happened and what the ramifications are, that is going to be the guideline.

Curtiss Strietelmier – He thinks this goes back to the idea of transparency. Saying to the person: Can I show you where I'm making this decision from. Here is the data I am using. Here's the decision making process I'm going through. Here's why I'm doing what I'm doing. And that is all on the table. This is why he is making the decision. If a situation arises that he has to say he doesn't know if he can be unbiased, there's nothing wrong with saying I'm sitting this one out. There are good board members there. They are smart and you can trust them.

Erika Watkins – There is knowing yourself and identifying what you can and cannot do or participate in. She thinks that is valuable. When you are working in situations where you have to make decisions with something or someone you know, it is easier to make the decision when you understand your "why" and who you are doing it for. It impacts your decision in an honest and objective way. When you mislead or negate your "why" you miss the opportunity.

Q 17- An acquaintance approaches you with a complaint about a teacher in the corporation. What do you do?

Ron Donahue - If someone brings a complaint to the Board, they have an obligation to listen. They should not make a judgement then. They should listen and take it to the appropriate person. Then follow up to see what the resolution was. If it is disciplinary or a negative just tell the person they are going to move forward as a board. When a Board member is out in the public, the members should encourage people to come up to them and bring positives and negatives. Board members have to be the eyes and ears in the community. They have to be prepared.

Erika Watkins – She had a similar situation regarding this. She encouraged the person to go to the school principal. Always start in house. Then work their way up to assistant superintendent and ultimately the superintendent. She dropped some information to the superintendent so he was aware that a situation may be going on. From what she sees, he will allow the principal to take charge first and if he has to get involved it will be last. Serving on the school board is her first love and first job. Being in the middle she has to say this is what is going on and she is doing her best to stay out of it. What she has not done is a follow up.

Brett Miller – He would listen to their concerns and frustrations. There is a process in place. If he felt it was necessary to say something to the superintendent or assistant superintendent, he might do that. If it is a teacher issue they are going to go to the principal, assistant principal or associate principal. He is more than happy to be the sounding board to some degree. But there is a process.

Curtiss Strietelmier – I think they have all said it correctly. If it is a concern of health and safety he is going to say something pretty fast to somebody. If it is a concern of not liking a teacher or their grades, then he would tell them they have to go through the process. He would like to talk to Dr. McCall to see how he would like them to handle it.

Q 18 – What are the biggest challenges facing the Valparaiso Community Schools?

Brett Miller – The biggest challenge facing VCS is SB 1. Our students transferring to private and charter schools. The potential of a referendum in 2030. As well as improving communication, transparency with the students, faculty and community. Those are the issues that are going to continue to be issues until they are addressed.

Erika Watkins – She feels VCS is in a great position financially in comparison to many of our neighboring schools. We have become accustomed to a way of living. She does not think anyone wants that to be affected in any way. If we lose children we lose dollars and that begins to change what we are accustomed to in this community. It would be uncomfortable if we have to adjust our way of living because situations have changed. We have to figure out the stop and a quick stop. We have to figure out the why and a quick why. We have to figure out the reason people are leaving and hopefully they will return. We want to take some time and look at differences. They need to have teachers in the schools that look like the students they serve because relationships matter.

Ron Donahue - He thinks it is being dynamic enough to change fast enough as our community changes and we are able to meet those needs. Overall can we keep up with everything. There are so many things competing for our attention. As a board they need to make sure they are moving as fast as they can to implement the changes and meet the needs of the community. Charter schools may be able to make changes faster than we do.

Curtiss Strietelmier – Three things stood out to him. One is funding. We talked about student population decline. This is going to have to be addressed. There is a birth decline. We might need redistricting. Another is consistency in student achievement success. Do all subgroups do as well? Are there different populations, different backgrounds, different schools? Let's take a hard look at that data and make sure every child has the resources they need to be successful. Is there equity in support? Are the right teachers at the right schools? If they are behind, do they have the right support?

Q 19 – What books, articles, or studies about education have you read in the past few years? Describe an insight you took away from your reading.

Erika Watkins – ISBA did a book discussion this year. The book was titled Great on Their Behalf – Why School Boards Fail and How Can We be More Effective. That book focused more on student outcomes, student achievement and less of adult presence. She started to look at the Agendas more each month and hoped that eventually the agendas would be more student driven. We applaud athletics and those types of programs. They also want to cover the arts and all of the students who are doing well cross the board. We are more than just an athletic program. The book is reflective of how all of the children are doing in our school system and not just the ones who continue to perform well and continue to get the applause.

Brett Miller - A great deal of what he reads relates to mental health. A lot of what he does is focusing on understanding humans better. He takes current information and uses it. He has read about reducing aggression and anxiety within a classroom by using brown and white noise. There is a song called Weightless. The song is eight minutes of what clinically reduces your serotonin. This is the kind of stuff he looks into. He just got introduced to Chalk Beat. This is a national educational nonprofit news organization. It has its own Indiana section in it.

Curtiss Strietelmier – In his job he has to spend an hour and more going through and finding what he can that is education, technology and financial. Everything that is an article like this is what his life is. It is what he focuses on daily. He has a constant input of what's happening in current state. A book is one called The Anxious Generation. It focuses on a group of kids that have been raised on cell phones and the constant information being thrown at them that they can't control. Because they have these things in their hands they are not getting out on the playground and making mistakes and learning like we did when we were kids. It is about aspects of childhood that our kids need to make them successful as adults.

Ron Donahue - A lot of the articles he reads are health related. Kids have instant judgment or gratification on anything 24 hours a day. We are not going to stop that but we need to focus on giving them the tools to understand how to deal with those responses. Apple has studies where you can look and see how many times school agers pick up their phone. We need to look at it from their perspective and make sure we are communicating with them effectively and giving them the tools they need. Telling them Don't Do It is not realistic. They are going to do it. We have to prepare them on how to deal with all that is coming at them.

Q 20 – What is your primary goal in wanting to join the school board and what strengths do you think you'll bring to the board?

Brett Miller – He would love to improve the transparency with the school board, the students, the faculty and the community, as well as the upcoming challenges. VCS is in a much better situation than most school corporations. But you can't rest on your laurels. We need to be proactive versus reactive. We need to look at this now and see how this is going to impact our schools. His strengths and his career in mental health. The schools need to have an increased focus on mental health. He looks at the products of VCS and what they have done for his family.

Curtiss Strietelmier – Valpo has provided incredible opportunities for his kids – Arts, athletics, academics. There are so many great things that his kids have been able to experience because they have gone to VCS. He wants to pay that forward. He wants somebody else's kids to have that same thing. As a school board member, he can make that happen. He just wants to make sure kids have the best opportunity in this community to do what they want to do and be successful. He has been an educator in the past. He brings a lot of information from what happens in the classroom to what happens in the boardroom to what happens at the superintendent level. He is not here to make changes. This is just information he can pass along and support the board from a larger standpoint. He also has history as a coach. He loves working with kids. He loves the concept that children can be successful if they have the right goals, the right supports and the right people there to give them what they need. That is what he is here to offer as a school board member and he hopes he gets the opportunity to do so.

Erika Watkins – She would like four more years to continue the work she been able to do with other board members. Even if they do not give her that opportunity, she hopes they do not put her out of allowing her to cheer on the first week of school. She shows up with her pompoms. She cheers at as many schools as she can the first week. She encourages the students the best way she knows how. She would love to continue doing this work. She would love to continue being a voice and listen to the community and hear what they have to express and being able to pass that along to the other board members. She is an educator. She loves children. Education is really all she knows. You have to be proud to serve as an educator. They do not make a lot of money, but they love what they do and who they do it for. Even though her children are no longer in the school system, she is willing to keep showing up for other people's children because children are what matters. If it were only about her own children, she would have packed up and left last year. But she is still here and wants to serve in more ways than one. But this has been her greatest passion.

Ron Donahue – He has served on a lot of boards both local and national. He has been at this table a few times interviewing for the school board. Right now all of his kids are in school. He sees all the different aspects. He is involved with the teachers and the kids' friends. He has a lot he can bring. There are some easy ways the Board can communicate. He likes the Board being balanced out with people that have the experience. He looks forward to getting to know those things. He feels there are some things that the board can do to help our kids. Kids are the most important thing for Valpo. We owe it to them and ourselves to do everything we can. That is why he keeps coming back. When it is the right time, he will be selected. He hopes it is this time. There have been a lot of missed opportunities and now they are seeing kids leave. He has had a great experience with everybody. In that respect he wants to give back. But there are some things he feels he can be an impact on almost immediately.