

# Byer: DCSD priorities – budgets, strategy, curriculum

*Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News asked candidates for South Lake Tahoe City Council, Lake Tahoe Community College, Lake Tahoe Unified School District, Douglas County School District, South Tahoe Public Utility District and Lake Valley Fire Protection District a series of questions. We are running the responses in the order received.*



Keith Byer is one of two candidates for Area 3 of the Douglas County School District.

**Name:** B Keith Byer

**Age:** 53

**Job/profession:** Certified public accountant (Texas)

**What boards, commissions, or other experience, including volunteering, do you have?:** Tahoe Douglas Rotary Club member and board of directors member, have routinely volunteered at various fundraisers at lake schools, Junior Achievement-Moscow board of directors, KidSave (charity focused on placement of older orphans) Moscow fundraising chair, Anglo-American School

of Moscow School Board for eight years (member of board and member of finance committee).

**Why do you want to be on the school board?:** I believe parents need a strong voice on the school board and that I can build consensus from diverse viewpoints.

**Why should voters vote for you over another candidate?:** I am a parent of a recent graduate of Whittell and a current student of Whittell. I am currently active in support of the local schools. I have deep experience in budgeting and strategy development in both business and a school setting. I am a resident of Douglas County.

**What distinct experience or competency makes you uniquely qualified to lead effectively as an elected official?:** I have over 30 years of professional experience, with an emphasis in finance, working in diverse groups toward a common goal. I believe boards need to provide strong governance and bring a balance to the diverse stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, administration, and tax payers) points of view.

**Public agencies have been under scrutiny the last few years for lack of transparency and accountability. What will you do to ensure both?:** I believe Nevada has open meeting rules for a very valid reason and conversations and debate of key issues need to occur in this open forum. When issues are discussed and decided outside public meetings, distrust arises. Often organization leadership (CEO, superintendents, etc.) bring decisions before the board for ratification rather than discussion. Boards must understand both the pros and cons of a decision, which takes time and transparency.

**What stands out for you in the current budget that you support and that you would change?:** Douglas County has made and will continue to make investments in technology. I believe they should leverage that technology to hold costs where possible. They must also leverage the benefit of that

technology by providing training to teachers and evaluating the teachers on technology integration. I also note that Kingsbury Middle School was recently sold after many years on the market. When KMS was closed, promises were made that monies raised from its sale would be invested back in the lake schools. I want to ensure that happens.

**Describe three attributes for a successful board:** Transparent governance with members who fully understand the issues upon which they vote. Giving voice of all stakeholders. Strategic vision driving actions and expenditures.

**What are your thoughts about public employee defined benefits?:** Most voters saw their employers move away from defined benefit programs toward defined contribution programs many years ago. I believe we must move that way as well. You cannot properly budget for defined benefit plans as the costs depend on future events such as increases in life expectancy, interest rates, and health care inflation. Defined benefit plans can be used to hide the true costs of employees. Taxpayers must know the costs they are incurring each year to avoid surprises that build up. We cannot leverage our future for the current. We have seen municipalities go bankrupt partly in response to unfunded defined benefit pension and health care plans. Such situations do not benefit anyone including the educators who rely on bankrupt plans.

**Please explain your position on contracting out work normally done by staff:** I do not have strong positions on this matter but I believe the board has a fiduciary responsibility to spend taxpayer money wisely. I am not averse to contracting work out, but believe you must have very strict service definitions to ensure the work is done correctly and that competitive bids are received.

**What is your 10-year vision for the school district?:** The school has a formal strategic planning process, which is now under way that obtains inputs from all stakeholders. I value

this input and believe we should approach this process with an open mind and no preconceived notions. That said, my focus is preparing our kids for the work force of the future. This will require technology skills.

**What one vote in the last four years that the current board made do you disagree with and why?:** The current board was under significant financial pressure due to a reduction in state funding and has not kept up with required maintenance. The taxpayers are now being asked to fund this maintenance backlog via a special bond proposition. This bond may be rejected by voters, which will intensify the pressure on future budgets. At the end of the day, we work for taxpayers and parents.

**How many school board meetings have you attended this year?:** 2

**What do you know about the strategic plan, finances, debt, goals of the school district?:** I have read the strategic plan, budget and other publicly available documents and have a basic understanding of their contents. There must be direct linkage between the strategic plan and the budget. You will only achieve what you are willing to pay for. Linking money and objectives create honesty and transparency.

**Being on the school board means working as a team. How will you work with the next board for the greater good of the community?:** I have a great deal of experience working with diverse groups of people and finding common ground to move forward. Strong schools build strong communities.

**What should be the three main priorities for the board?:**  
Budgets, strategy, curriculum

**What do you know about Common Core? What is your opinion about it?:** I believe Douglas County and the state of Nevada are completely capable of managing their own schools. I do not believe federal funding should be tied to Common Core and the decision to adopt Common Core should be left to states and

school districts as well as the pedagogy chosen to teach their curriculum. I believe parents will demand challenging curriculum for their children if provided control of their schools.

I do believe in limited standardized testing to identify schools that have a large proportion of students unprepared for college or the work force. When these issues are detected, I believe we must look at root causes. Schools may be failing their mission; but, societal factors may be failing our schools. Limited standardized testing can bring focus where focus is needed.

I do not believe we should allow personal information about students outside a school district. Our kids have a right to privacy and as minors cannot waive that right.

**What is your opinion about career and technical education at the high school level?:** I believe this training is vital to our students, our local businesses, and our community. Many trades have shortages of labor and many tradesmen create small business. Lastly, trades expand our students' opportunity to make their home here in Douglas County.

**Do you support the expansion of charter schools? Why or why not?:** No one can be trusted to act in the best interest of students more than parents. I support school choice be that public schools, home schooling, or charter schools. We should have enough charter schools to meet the demand for charter schools. I welcome arguments from those who believe charter schools harm public schools but need strong evidence to override parental choice.

**The lake seems to be underrepresented. Do you believe this is true? Why or why not?:** The allocation of board seats seems quite fair to me so I don't think it's an issue of underrepresentation. If elected, I will represent every student in Douglas County and expect the other board members

to do the same. I do not believe there is inherent bias against the lake schools. I think we have an issue that lake school enrollment has dropped and school administration has reacted. Some of this enrollment drop is caused by the lack of affordable housing at the lake which may be partially remedied as the developer who recently bought KMS may build up to 400 units. But part of the enrollment drop is self-inflicted. The board failed to continue a program, without explanation, that encouraged South Lake Tahoe students who wanted a small school environment to attend Zephyr Cove and Whittell.

The fact that your parents choose to live at the lake should not affect where you go to college or what trade you practice: that should be determined by your ambition and abilities. I believe there needs to be a minimum curriculum available to every Douglas County student and that we should develop innovative ways to deliver that curriculum. This could be e-learning, expansion of the relationship with South Lake Tahoe, development of programs with LTCC and WNC, adding key teachers, and other solutions. Several lake school parents spent hours of their valuable time looking at solutions. After more than a year, they have not had a response from the board or the administration.

**If you answered yes to the question above, what will you do to change the underrepresentation? If you answered no, what will you do to change the perception?:** I believe the board and administration should spend more time talking and listening to lake parents. When you look at expenditure per student, we spend significantly more per lake student than valley student; but expenditures per student isn't how you get into the best universities or trained as a welder. The cost per student is higher because of higher facilities and operating costs. Every student in Douglas County must have an education system that allows them the opportunity to reach their full potential. If we fixed curriculum, we'd fix most of the perception issue. I would ask the superintendent to write articles, as needed, in

the lake schools newsletter discussing administrative and board decisions which have a direct effect on the lake schools (past examples of such would be teaching staff reductions and art program eliminations). I would also encourage her to spend a few days each month in an office at the lake engaging lake parents, listening to lake teachers, and interacting with lake students. If you've ever done this, you know just how special our schools are.

**Tell us something about yourself that people may not know:**

Many, many, years and pounds ago, I ran a marathon in under 5 hours. I've flown over 2 million miles, been to over 70 countries, and lived in 4 countries on 3 different continents. I've been a repeat guest lecturer at the University of Texas in business applications and want to teach in high school or college after I retire. I've had articles published over 30 times and contributed to 4 books on doing business in various countries. My high school class was less than 30, similar to Whittell.

**You have said you want more technology in schools. What kind of technology and how do propose to pay for it?:**

I believe that every student must have a base competency in technology. Mechanics, truck drivers, and lawyers all use iPads. The high school will be providing every student a Chrome Book that I believe is a sufficient platform but they must integrate the technology into the classroom. As to paying for it, I believe leveraging technology could save money in some areas such as textbooks, reproduction costs, etc.

Douglas County is blessed to have generous businesses and engaged service clubs. I would like to see the school seek relationships with businesses and service clubs in the area to garner support of select programs in the school. You can see the generosity of GE in the Douglas County Community Center and the generosity of Tahoe Douglas Rotary in Kahle Community Center. Attend any meeting of a local Rotary, Kiwanis, Optimist, Soroptimist, or Lions Club and

you'll see their money evidence their passion for education. I believe if the school could create a vision, we'd find the sponsorship. As only one narrow example, I believe if the school created a program to engage girls in STEM, we could find engineers in the local community to serve as mentors.