

Interview with Laura Metcalfe, 2024 Candidate for Maricopa County Attorney

By Clay Latimer, March 2024

The candidates were worried, and who could blame them?

The deadline for gathering signatures to qualify for the ballot was only weeks away, forcing many candidates to bear down immediately or risk ending their campaigns early.

But Laura Metcalfe, Democratic candidate for Maricopa County Superintendent of Schools, had already moved on.

She'd collected 8,000 signatures by that time, double the required number, a sign of her determination to unseat Republican incumbent Steve Watson, who's currently under investigation for financial malfeasance by the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors.

"The signatures are out of the way," she said. "The focus is on Mr. Watson; the dominant issue is the fiscal malfeasance that's taken place and being investigated.

"There's no accountability, even though it's funded by taxpayer dollars. There's no oversight. There's no leadership.

"I want to bring fiscal integrity and accountability back to this office."

Duties of the superintendent's office include overseeing school governing board elections, bond and override elections, and maintaining home-school and private school records.

In Maricopa County, the superintendent also oversees the Maricopa County Regional School District, which serves students awaiting court hearings in county detention and students at Hope High School, an accommodation school for students who left traditional school settings.

Watson ran into trouble here.

The Maricopa County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution nearly a year ago saying Watson's office has consistently misspent and misreported accommodation-school money. They went further in October, hiring an independent auditor to investigate the allegations. The report is due this spring.

In addition, Republicans appear to be questioning Watson's viability. Shelli Boggs, former head of the governing board of the East Valley Institute of Technology, is challenging Watson in the GOP primary.

That won't hurt Metcalfe, who has prepared for this moment for much of her career. She worked 27 years as a high school teacher, district-level administrator, and a leader in the Maricopa County Superintendent of Schools Office. She earned a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Northern Arizona University and is certified in Arizona as a school superintendent.

When the Maricopa County Democratic Party (MCDP) established the Future Leaders of Arizona (FLOA) program, underscoring the importance of electing new leaders to important educational governing boards, they turned to Metcalfe. After completing the program, she captured a board seat for the East Valley Institute of Technology, the job she held before mounting her campaign.

"It is time to elect a Democrat with a fresh perspective, with a wealth of experience, knowledge, and a passion for education for all students, teachers, and schools while bringing fiscal accountability to this office moving forward," she said.

Metcalfe is focused on several other issues, including:

- Providing curriculum and support for "overlooked" schools like the Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind, schools in the jail system, and schools that educate refugees.

"This office has the capabilities to do that, but hasn't provided anything in eight years," she said.

- Addressing the teacher shortage. According to data gathered at the start of the 2023-2024 school year, 7,518 job openings for teachers were available in Arizona. A remarkable 53% (3,997) of those openings were filled by teachers who did not meet 'standard' certification requirements.

Additionally, only 18% (1,292) of the openings were filled by a teacher who met standard certification requirements and 29% (2,229) couldn't be filled out as of September.

"We've had teachers scared away and burnt out enough to where they are done with this industry. That's not going to help the long-term goals of academic achievement for our students," she said.

"We've talked about that for a long time but the other piece to this is that the money is not always the issue. It is the level of work that the teachers must put up with. When schools are fully funded, then the schools have enough opportunity to hire support staff to be able to bring the level of work down to an allowable amount for teachers."

- Protecting students from violence.

"It's going to be a full security piece - rather than just a school officer sitting in an office, hanging out at lunch, watching TV. School resource officers aren't always the answer," she said.

It's been a long time since a Democrat served as Maricopa County Superintendent of

Schools.How long?

“According to my research, 1871 was the last time a Democrat held this seat,” she said.
“Arizona wasn’t a state then. A territorial governor placed a Democrat in the seat.

“It’s time.”