

## Collier superintendent on hot seat at school board candidate forum

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Superintendent Dennis Thompson took center stage at a Collier County School Board candidate forum Thursday evening.

And he wasn't even there.

During the forum, sponsored by The League of Women Voters of Collier County, moderator Chris Straton asked the candidates what they would tell Thompson their first priority for him would be.

District 4 candidate Mark Swanson said Thompson needs to go out into the community and mend bridges.

"He is not doing his job because the trust isn't there. Morale is as low as I have seen it," he said. "This is not the military. We do not operate from the top down."

District 4 candidate Julie Sprague said she also would encourage Thompson to get involved in the community with more open communication.

"There is a climate of fear in this education system which is very destructive," she said. "I would encourage him in his decision-making process to take in the opinions of all stakeholders. He has been making a decision and then working backwards to talk to people."

Joe Paterno, a candidate for the District 4 seat, said the community feels distrust and the School Board needs to ensure that the community knows everything is done above board.

"The superintendent needs to explain to the community what happened. If we do everything above board and in the public eye, we will restore that trust," he said. "Communication is key. I have talked with business people in this community. Many of them don't know what he is doing and they have no clue about his vision in the community."

Adrienne Markopolos, also a candidate for District 4, said communication was key.

"As long as you work in line with the community, the trust can be regained," she said. "Dr. Thompson has to understand he does not operate in a vacuum. He needs to get out into the community and challenge the perception of his reputation."

District 4 candidate Gary Smith said the board needs to be more assertive.

"As long as the tail shakes the dog, we are not going to get any place," he said. "Dr. Thompson thinks he's the dog, but he is the tail. Until the board lets him know that, we are not going to get anywhere."

District 2 candidate Rick MacClugage said Thompson is here as superintendent and the district needs to move forward.

"We need to hold him accountable to do his job," he said. "He needs to get out into the community, visit (school advisory committee) meetings and talk to the community."

When it came to what they would tell Thompson as their first act as a board member, School Board member Kathleen Curatolo said communication is definitely an issue.

"I would reenergize the staff liaison committees, which have not met since Dr. Thompson has been here," said the District 2 incumbent. "I would encourage him to meet with community leaders and discuss with them how the leadership in the community can support his educational policies."

School Board Chairwoman and District 4 incumbent Linda Abbott said Thompson has her support and he has spoken with community groups about the decisions and the goals for the community.

"Sometimes if you hear something so many times, you start to believe it," she said. "Information has been withheld from us in the past. Dr. Thompson has one rule — if you have something on your mind, you need to express it."

The primary election will be held Tuesday, Aug. 26. Collier TV, Comcast Cable 11, will rebroadcast the forum from 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday, July 31, and from 8 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 2.