

# Bluewater board organizes debates <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** The Sun Times

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 18 Sep 2011

## EXCERPTS:

An education-themed election debate will go ahead as planned Monday night in Kincardine, even though just one Huron- Bruce candidate has agreed to attend.

Organizers said only NDP Grant Robertson has confirmed he will be there, while the Green Party agreed to send a substitute to speak for candidate Patrick Main.

"It seems a little strange," Robertson said Friday. "Education is one of the most important issues on the provincial level. I would have thought candidates would have made an attempt to be there."

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The 7:30 p.m. all-candidates meeting at the Kincardine high school, and a similar debate at Chesley's high school Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. for Bruce-Grey- Owen Sound candidates, have been planned since early July. They're being put on by the Bluewater District School Board as part of a provincial election and education issues awareness campaign the Ontario Public School Boards Association launched last May.

Five of six Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound candidates have told board officials they will be at the Wednesday meeting, with only the Libertarian candidate unable to attend, board officials said.

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It's the first time elected school trustees have organized education-themed election events during a provincial election.

Huron-Bruce is not the only riding where trustees are disappointed at the response from candidates, even though invitations went out to all main political parties in Bluewater's two main ridings in early July, said Bluewater trustee Jan Johnstone, a director on the OPSBA provincial board.

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"It's all very transparent," Johnstone said. "These meetings are supposed to be nonpartisan strategies to raise awareness and engage politicians. This is a huge file. Education is second only to health care in the province, and it really impacts young people not only today but tomorrow."

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Thompson said the Tories have promised to boost education spending by \$2.5 billion in the party's first term if elected Oct. 6.

"In terms of priority services, clearly and simply, we've listened to the people," Thompson said. "It's health care and education that we need to focus on going forward. They are our two priorities."

Mitchell said the Liberals since 2003 have increased education spending from \$7,265 per student to \$11,538 per student.

"Our commitment to education is as strong today as it was when we were elected."

Robertson said education is among this election's most important issues and he will attend Monday's session with or without his opponents.

"I'm prepared to go and talk about education and focus on solutions and where we go in the future. In some ways it doesn't matter to me if there's another candidate there," he said. "I'm just disappointed that they wouldn't want to participate in something that's so crucial to our future, particularly here in rural Ontario with the kind of trouble that we've seen in education."

Catherine Fife, president of the Ontario Public School Boards Association, said about one-third of Ontario's public boards have organized education forums, all-candidate meetings and similar events to highlight education issues. Most are scheduled on or near next Tuesday, which OPSBA has named education day.

But there's surprise and "a growing feeling of anger" that many candidates are giving the sessions a miss. In Peel region, the province's second-largest public board, two of five scheduled events were cancelled because not enough candidates agreed to attend.

"We have been surprised that candidates have not taken us up on the opportunity to put forward their vision for public education," Fife

said in an interview.

Bluewater board chairwoman Marg Gaviller also said she's surprised and disappointed at the lack of response in Huron-Bruce, but is pleased at what looks to be almost full participation at Wednesday's Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound education forum in Chesley.

"Education is not sort of a high priority issue on the total list. It gets buried in all the other issues and does not get addressed, or questions raised, to the extent that we in the educational field think it should," Gaviller said.

"It seems to me that this is an important event to be at if candidates are looking for votes."

-reprinted from the Sun Times

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** election <sup>[3]</sup>

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