

# The teacher-candidate who asked, “If not me, then who?”

By Paul Wesslund - September 23, 2018

Last year’s pre-legislative session discussions about Kentucky’s teacher pensions and education funding so disgusted Paula Setser-Kissick that she vowed to volunteer for whoever was running against the incumbent in her state Senate district.

She grew frustrated when she learned there was no opponent. And got even more frustrated when no one she talked to was willing to run.

One night her husband scolded, “What are you griping about? It’s not like you’re doing it.”

That set Setser-Kissick thinking toward what she calls a “defining moment, because I thought that’s true. I’m expecting other people to step up but I’m not doing it.” Although her only previous political experience was making a point of regular voting in elections, she fell back on the ancient advice, “If not me, then who?”

Now Setser-Kissick is running against four-term Republican Senate incumbent Alice Forgy Kerr for the seat that represents the southern part of Lexington.

## Paula Setser-Kissick on education

It’s logical for education issues to be what “pushed me over the edge” to file as a candidate, says Setser-Kissick, since she’s a technology resource teacher for Fayette County Public Schools. Part of that job includes being digital citizenship coordinator, which covers topics like internet safety.

She says insights from that technology background make her critical of policies that favor the teaching of specific job skills at the expense of other areas of education.

“In 10 to 15 years there are going to be jobs out there in the work world that we can’t even imagine yet,” says Setser-Kissick.

“We don’t even know what those jobs will be because technology and other advances are going to dictate what’s going to happen,” she says. “There seems to be this push of work skills and work readiness which I have nothing against. But if we starve our colleges and our universities and we try to push everybody into this work readiness or vocational fields, then how are you creating flexibility to meet these new jobs that are going to be out there ... liberal arts creates that flexibility and critical thinking skills.”

## Other issues, including “equitable tax reform”

Other issues she highlights include infrastructure investment; making sure Kentuckians have affordable, quality health care; and equitable tax reform.

Setser-Kissick says that for her, equitable tax reform means a broad discussion that considers all approaches. She criticizes discussions that don't include examination of corporate tax incentives and loopholes that benefit only the wealthiest.

"I'm very much a proponent of working people," she says. "What equitable tax reform means to me is that the wealthy do get to pay their fair share. It could mean simplifying the code ... to make taxes easier to understand from the lowest to the highest level. We have to be willing to talk about it."

## Setser-Kissick on the dysfunction in Frankfort

That kind of public debate, Setser-Kissick says, was missing during the past legislative session.

"The lack of transparency, how bills were developed in private, without input from all the stakeholders there in Frankfort, how fast they were pushed through and piggybacked on top of other bills where they weren't even read, that's an embarrassment," she says. "It was almost the ultimate disrespect to constituents ... I just can't imagine anything worse to do to the people of Kentucky."

*The campaign motto for Paula Setser-Kissick, a teacher running for KY Senate  
(photo courtesy of the candidate)*

Setser-Kissick sees those procedures, along with a lack of civility in debating issues, as undermining the ability for Kentucky to make good public policy.

"I look at the dysfunction in Frankfort and I see where they insult constituents willfully. They won't speak up and call somebody else out when they say something disrespectful," she says. "You have to have reasonable and polite discussions to have the core trust in the elected officials that they are going to do the right thing and that they are acting in the best interest of Kentuckians. I think that core trust has been almost totally destroyed after what happened over the two years. If there is no trust, nobody is going to trust you about education or anything else."

For her part, Setser-Kissick pledges honesty and asks voters to hold her accountable for what she says and does. "I never wanted a political career. I don't have any ego in this, and so I don't have anybody to impress. I just want to go in and try to do the right thing," she says.

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## Becoming a Democrat, and the campaign

Setser-Kissick's voting career began when she registered as a Republican while a high school

senior growing up in eastern Kentucky's Johnson County. She intended to be an Independent, until her mom (who was Republican while her dad was a Democrat) pointed out that would cut her out of voting in primaries, which were the most consequential elections in the heavily Republican area.

She kept her Republican registration after moving to Lexington. But over the past couple of years she got increasingly concerned as she watched the political trends, especially party differences on education issues. About changing her registration to become a Democrat, she says, "What I see in Kentucky is not the Republican Party I grew up with."

Setser-Kissick doesn't seem daunted by running against a long-time incumbent. She says, "It means a lot of hard work and boots on the ground, knocking on doors, talking to voters and being everywhere that I can." She says she enjoys meeting people on the campaign trail, and gets especially strong interest from people when they learn she's a teacher. She says, "I don't have big money, but I do have hard work, and as a teacher that's something I have never been afraid of."

And she hopes to see others without political experience get more involved.

"We helped make a mess of this by not stepping up," she says. **"We have to come straighten this up for our young people who are going to come behind us and become leaders in their own right."**

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