

League of Women Voters of Teaneck Voters' Guide Board of Education 2019

Our voters' guide questionnaire and letter of invitation to the Candidates' Night, sponsored by LWV Teaneck, was mailed to each of the candidates for Teaneck Board of Education at the end of August. In addition to asking them about their Teaneck residency, occupation, education, family & community involvement, we asked each candidate to answer the following questions and to limit answers to a total of 500 words or less:

- 1. How can the district enhance academic rigor? (List specific recommendations)**
- 2. What do you see as benefits and/ or challenges of offering Pre-K?**
- 3. What impact do you anticipate the influx of new apartment development will have on the Teaneck public schools and how should the district plan for this?**
- 4. Given the budgetary constraints under which the district operates, what areas would you focus on to achieve cost savings without adversely impacting instructional goals.**

The candidates' responses follow unedited, and are in the order received:

Martin Ramirez, 277 Johnson Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: 12

Occupation: Attorney

Education: Farmdale Elementary School, LAUSD
El Sereno Jr. High, LAUSD
Phillips Academy, Andover MA
BA Anthropology, Stanford University
JD, Columbia Law School

Family: Married 22 years to Laura Fein. We have five daughters.

Community Involvement:

- Teaneck Board of Education, member since January 2017.
- Congregation Keshet Israel, board member 2006-2007.
- Elementary School Teacher, LAUSD 1989-1993.

- 1
 - a. Recruit the best teachers. We're lucky to have some outstanding teachers in Teaneck Schools, but the evaluation and tenure processes were not always rigorous. The two previous superintendents vastly improved the teacher evaluation process such that merely "meeting standards" is no longer enough to obtain tenure. This is a long-term fix, but results will follow.
 - b. Promote student and parental involvement. We have so much to offer in Teaneck Schools, but it's for nothing if students and parents don't get involved. That's why I support our superintendent who has connected with our community, getting people excited about our schools again.
 - c. I support our superintendent's initiatives to standardize and improve teacher training.

- 2...
 - a. Everybody talks about closing the "achievement gap." Many initiatives have been proposed and, frankly, most have failed. I think offering full-day instructional Pre-K to Teaneck's most at-risk students has the best chance at closing the gap. I stress "instructional" because this is not day-care. These students are in school learning skills that will help them for the rest of their lives.
 - b. Pre-K is expensive. Luckily, our superintendent and administration took advantage of temporary state funding. I voted in favor, but hoped it would be a pilot study that, if successful, would later be expanded. Success must be proven, so we need to track the current Pre-K cohort and their non-Pre-K classmates into the first years of primary school. Testing will show whether we succeeded in closing the achievement gap. Unfortunately, the board majority recently voted to expand the program at great cost without first determining whether it's actually providing hoped-for benefits. This program is popular, but popularity does not guaranty student success, so I oppose the expansion. It not only diminishes funding for other needs but creates huge financial risk in the event of funding cuts.

- 3
 - a. I am 100% certain all new students will be welcomed in our schools and our teachers, staff, and administrators will do everything possible to minimize any disruption.
 - b. The greatest uncertainty is whether any school-age children will attend Teaneck public or local private schools. Though our enrollment has been declining, classroom space has become scarce and I've heard of increased class sizes in a few instances. This may be a necessary temporary fix if we have a large influx of school-age children from those developments.
 - c. Perhaps the re-purposing of the Eugene Field administrative building into classrooms for the Pre-K program could provide overflow space in the event of a sudden influx of students.

- 4
 - a. I will continue to oppose the \$5 million pre-K expansion.
 - b. Keeping labor costs in check but competitive is a balancing act because our greatest assets and expenses are teachers, staff and administrators. During my time on the negotiating committee, we kept salary increases at or below 3% with significant givebacks to bring the net increases closer to 2%, consistent with state spending-increase limits.
 - c. Not increasing bureaucracy. Our new superintendent has some new administrators, but most are replacements or converted positions.

Linda Burns, 166 Bogert Street

Years residing in Teaneck: 25

Occupation: Business Systems Project Management, Time Inc.

Education: BS Business Management, FDU

Family: Husband – Russell Burns, Sons - Louis (class of 2009/ TCNJ class of 2013 – degree in History) and Dorien (class of 2013/WVU class of 2017 – degree in Accounting)

Community Involvement:

- Treasurer East Votee Neighborhood Assoc.
- Member Northeast Teaneck Block Presidents Assoc
- Teaneck Schools PTO's – various projects: Project Graduation, Building Bridges to Unity
- American Corporate Partners – mentor to military transitioning into civilian employment

1 Teachers must believe in each child's potential and provide an environment that is both challenging and supportive. The curriculum must be high quality at every grade level and include ways to continuously build upon understanding. There must always be high standards surrounding the measurement of the results, with the understanding that people learn differently and at different paces.

2. While some studies show that the academic benefits of Pre-K can fade over time, all studies do agree that the effects of attending a good Pre-K program can last a lifetime.

Not all children are born with the same advantages and opportunities and Pre-K can help some children attain school-readiness, which include self-control, language skills and social skills.

One challenge is justifying the cost given our limited resources. However, the cost will be worth it if children can start the academic process from the same starting point, which would help gauge the success of our academic programs, ultimately leading to cost savings further down the road by reducing the need for remedial programs. Another challenge is that training is provided to the teachers with well-understood goals and objectives.

3. The Teaneck school district commissioned a study to gauge the impact of the near-term development projects on our school system and both have found that we can currently absorb the estimated 150 or so children expected to arrive.

However, although the apartment complexes are being marketed as 'luxury' apartments with the expectation that a certain demographic will be renting them, there are no guarantees that those in the market for luxury apartments will indeed be the ones that rent those units. Currently, one of the completed projects is having difficulty renting out their units at the amount of rent they are asking for. In addition, the Pre-K program could be a pipeline to increase overall enrollment in the district. Therefore, I think that long term planning should allow for the possibility that enrollment will increase over time.

4 . There is a lot of talk of reigning in district costs, but the school funding equation is extremely complex. There are many state-mandated regulations and requirements that may limit the extent of

any cost savings we can accomplish. Those that can be accomplished easily are politically untenable. Therefore, we should focus more on the revenue side of the equation. I see opportunity in the automation of 'back office' transactional duties such as purchasing and payroll. In 2016, The township of Bogota entered into a shared services agreement with Teaneck for processing Payroll, which resulted in additional revenue for Teaneck. Shared services agreements can be expanded more creatively to bring in additional revenue. We can also investigate non-governmental grant programs and perhaps corporate partnerships. Until government at the state and federal level changes the way public education is funded, we will always have to take hard looks at costs and seek out new ways to generate revenue.

Denise Sanders, 31 Genesee Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: More than 40 years

Occupation: Special Education Evaluator & Therapist

Education:

- * Proud graduate of the Teaneck school district
- * M.A. in Education from New York University
- * M.S. in Assistive Technology from Mercy College
- * B.S. from Northeastern University in Speech Pathology and Audiology

Family: I am married (Tony) and have two children who are graduates from the Teaneck school district. The foundation and support from our Teaneck district school help further my children education whereas my son was able to receive his MBA in Marketing and my daughter is completing her MS in Pharmaceutical Science from St. John's University 2020

Community Involvement:

- Member and past PTO/PTA Co-President to Lowell and Bryant Schools
Member and Chair and Co-Chair for the Building Quality Maintenance Team (BQMT) at TJMS and the High School
- Participated and chaperoned two Project Graduation high school events one in 2007 and 2014
- A member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc Public Service Organization
- A member of African-American Groups of Bergen County United

1. Portfolio assessments should be used to determine students' skills and abilities, in supporting students various learning styles and dispositions. Tiered instructional strategies and differentiated instructional practices must be incorporated into the core instructional lessons, to ensure that instruction is individualized for all students. In addition, cultivating a level of high expectations for our students, staff and administration is also important. We have to assess and evaluate what we are doing in the district to see what is working and make improvements where necessary.

2. Although there is controversy about whether Pre-K programs are beneficial, it doesn't mean there is no value in a high-quality Pre-K program. In a diverse community like Teaneck, we need to seriously look at implementing programs that work to elevate the academic achievement of all students with different learning styles. While the long-term benefits of Pre-K have mixed results, we believe that by appropriately supporting students as they move through our school system, students will be the beneficiaries of a world-class education. In addition, Pre-K provides high quality childcare for young parents helping to make Teaneck become a sought-after community

for new families. A significant challenge would be the inability to meet the demands of the changing demographic groups attending Teaneck schools.

3. The school district has been proactive in preparing for a potential influx of new students by conducting demographic studies and has prepared contingency plans to absorb an increased population in our school system. The district will be prepared to welcome these new students just as we are open to welcome any and all students from Teaneck into our public schools. They will certainly benefit from our new 5-year strategic plan and the new rigorous academic program in support of 21st Century learning opportunities.

4. Cost savings would include continuing the Solar Panel Program and Energy Savings Improvement Plan (ESIP), expanding shared services with the township and other neighboring municipalities and organizations when possible. To offset our basic costs, I would look at other revenue generating opportunities through our Community Education Program, grant opportunities, and ad placements on the athletic field. Also, as the district becomes more technologically advanced, and operations and procedures become more digitized, a thorough inventory of supplies and materials in offices would be reviewed to look at reducing these costs.

Sebastian Rodriguez, 553 Sagamore Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: 19 years

Occupation: Non-Profit Management Professional

Education: B.A. Athletic Administration, St. John's University

M.S. Non Profit Management, New School for Social Research

Family: Married to Kesha, son Daniel and daughter Adriana, both Teaneck HS graduates

Community Involvement:

- (Board of Education Trustee) Teaneck Board of Education -
- (PTO Co-President) Lowell School
- (Board Member and Coach) Teaneck Southern Little League
- (Founding Director) Youth Education Sports and Society (Y.E.S.S.) Youth Flag Football League
- (Board Liaison) Teaneck Youth Advisory Board (YAB)
- (Board Member) Greater Bergen County YMCA
- (Commissioner) Bergen County Office of Multicultural Affairs -
- Received "2010 Community Service Award" by Teaneck Chamber of Commerce

1 I recommend that the superintendent develops a culture of high expectations for all teachers, administrators, students and parents. One quick example is how the Teaneck school district has increased the variety of AP and Honors courses at THS, while at the same time increasing the number of students participating in these courses. This shows everyone is aligned with these high standards, however the district needs to continue to set higher goals of participation each year to make sure more students continue to be prepared to take AP and Honors courses.

2. The benefits and challenges for offering a PreK in the school district are:

Benefits-

- More (and earlier) educational and social emotional opportunities for children
- In addition, research shows that all children benefit from high-quality preschool, with low-income children and English learners benefiting the most. A substantial number of studies demonstrate the benefits of high-quality PreK programs. Economists have shown the benefits of early education investments, which generate approximately \$7 for every dollar invested. The potential of the PreK program can be best realized with the type of high quality content used in the Teaneck School District program.

Challenges-

- Program cost (start up and operations)
- One time funding opportunity to start program
- Lack of physical space

These challenges are being met by careful use of Board of Education funds, timely application for state grants and the renovation and expansion of physical facilities.

3. Based on the reports I have read, in terms of children attending the public schools the effect seems to be minimal, about 60 children. The numbers, spread among different ages/grades will have an insignificant impact on class size. So from that aspect, I expect a positive impact. On the other hand, anytime you have a change in the demographics of any community it is important for the newcomers, as well the people who already reside there to find ways to get to know each other and work together to continue to improve the community. .

4 I will review all our revenue generating line items (i.e. tuition from out-of-town students, building fees, and Medicaid Reimbursements (SEMI) to make sure the government provides reimbursement to the district for its portion of the school-based special education services provided etc.) and make sure that our policies are well aligned with these line items.

I will continue to lobby the state to properly fund the school funding formula. (it has been underfunded for years, costing districts like Teaneck millions in dollars in revenue).

I will then make sure all families complete their free and reduced lunch application as this will give the district an opportunity to receive substantially greater amount of federal aid for the district. After that, I will look carefully at all the budget areas that have the least negative impact on instruction and/or student development.

Yassine Elkaryani, 735 Elm Avenue, Apt 2B

Years residing in Teaneck: 9 years

Occupation: Information Technology Consultant; Entrepreneur

Education: Fairleigh Dickenson University, MBA

Family: Married

Community Involvement:

- Teaneck Advisory Board on Community Relations - Chairman.
- Teaneck Youth Advisory Board - Advisor.
- Teaneck Organization for Public Schools - Teaneck 5k Organizing Team Member.
- Financial Success for Families - Personal Finance Educator.
- North Hudson Islamic Education Center - Youth Director (2013 - 2015).
- Mymaroc.org - Vice Chairman and Former Youth Committee Co-Chair.

- 1
 - a. The no-brainer: Money should go to the the classroom first.
 - b. Support the Superintendent's strategic plan and continuously measure its progress and outcomes.
 - c. Initiate an academic excellence steering committee.
 - d. Benchmark based on previous years and by comparing with similar school districts, and setting ambitious yet attainable targets.
 - e. We must make sure our teachers teach according to the standards.
 - f. We must be prepared to pay to hire the best teachers and give them the conditions and training to excel. At the same time, we must raise the bar in terms of tenure standards.
 - g. When Board of Education meeting agendas and minutes are not shared with the public in a timely fashion, we indirectly and negatively curb the healthy dialogue that can lead to progress. I am working on a software/app to improve communication between board members and the public, and when elected, I will explore the possibility of taking live questions from those residents who prefer to watch the meetings on video.
 - h. Encourage the Teaneck activists who regularly attend Council meetings to also attend the Board of Education meetings to suggest solutions.

- 2
 - a. I would like to see a healthy path toward universal Pre-K and want to make sure we take every grant possible. However, we should not use capital money on real estate to expand the program knowing that future grants are not guaranteed (the Governor told us during his Teaneck town hall).

We should look into housing our Pre-K at entities that already have Pre-K; the AUCC on Oakdene is now open and ready to take students. This way we save on the real estate and other expenses (teachers, janitors, utilities, liabilities...)

- b. Especially that we have a structural deficit, before we inject taxpayer money to scale the Pre-K program, we must demonstrate the success of the program.

- 3
 - a. Given the latest impact study the school district has done, the apartment developments coming up soon will not have a major impact on our classroom sizes. Nevertheless, new students will continue to move into Teaneck, be it to a one-family house or to an apartment. We must be prepared for all scenarios.
 - b. The Municipal Council and its boards and commissions are the entities that decide on development. The elephant in Teaneck is a divide between the Board of Education and the Municipal Council. No politician in Teaneck can exonerate themselves from this. For the schools to be able to plan, we must work to enhance the relationship between the Board of Education and the Municipal Council while making sure both entities maintain their autonomy.

4. a. I would like to see our tax money spent primarily in the classroom and what immediately and positively affects the educational outcomes of our students. Administrative buildings do not fall into that category.
- b. Exploring shared services with the municipal government, Bergen County, and the State of NJ (e.g. security).
- c. Providing enough room for discussion and community input before voting on big ticket items.

BOARD OF EDUCATION ELECTION DAY

**Tuesday, November 5th
Polls Open 6AM to 8PM**

DON'T FORGET TO VOTE!

This Voters Guide has been prepared by the League of Women Voters of Teaneck, a nonpartisan group of local residents assuring that all eligible voters have the opportunity and the information to exercise their right to vote. Our organization provides opportunities for voter registration each year, works to improve our government; studies local, state and national issues, and strives to engage all citizens in the civic decisions that could impact their lives.