
Why should you be elected to the school board?

Sai Bhargavi Akiri

As a Program Manager with 20 years of global project management experience in strategy and planning, my role at Bristol-Myers Squibb is to manage multi-million dollar program budgets and enlist approvals from diverse groups of stakeholders. I will bring that skillset to build consensus amongst parents, teachers and administrators. If I am elected, the skills accumulated in my 20 years as a certified project manager will be of great service to the Board of Education. I will be dedicated to ensuring that our schools run efficiently, effectively and our children get a world class education that equips them for their futures.

We have a great district but one should always strive to do better. If elected to Board of Education, my priorities will be:

1. Efficient Use of Allocated Budget for BOE - Are we getting the most “bang for our buck,” as we spend approximately \$21,000 per child in our district? In these unprecedented times, I would like to ensure our tax dollars are being efficiently used to provide the best education possible for our children. I honestly believe in providing a world class education to our children, so they are successful in the demanding global job market.
2. Community Outreach and Engagement - Most parents are busy and unable to attend the BoE meetings to provide their valuable inputs on students' needs. They also miss out on decisions made at BoE meetings. Therefore, I propose that all BoE meeting be live-streamed.
3. Effective Communication and Transparency - Most parents and residents are unaware of projects approved by BoE. I would work to improve communication on projects, budget spending and status updates on our districts “5 year strategic plan.” As an example, most residents might be surprised to hear that a planned referendum in 2020 for media center updates has now been postponed to next year. Given the current times of financial uncertainty impacting everyone, the proposed multi-million dollar updates to media centers needs to be reevaluated.
4. Impactful Policies - Our district's policies should reflect the overall education and development of our children along with special needs, extra-curricular activities and transportation. We need our curricula to engage a child in his/her overall development. I am concerned that all elementary schools are not taught uniformly when it comes to executing the district's curriculum. The gaps were very evident this year when the district switched to remote instruction in March. I believe our district needs to devise periodic evaluation to address learning gaps between the schools.
5. Collaboration with Teachers - My family had a great remote learning experience with Mrs. Watkins and Mrs. Finklestien's 3rd grade classroom teachers in March. I want to work with teachers to replicate the successes at William Woodruff elementary school to bring them to schools across the district. We also need to strive to balance screen time at elementary schools with traditional paper and pencil while children are still developing their fine motor skills.

What do you consider an important challenge facing the school district?

How would you address it?

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The BOE, as a representative body, cannot expect for families to understand the intricacies of important decisions in a few hours within the context of a highly controlled meeting. Our school system is the primary reason families move into our community, and they ought to be as informed as the individuals making the decisions that affect it. Families should also feel empowered to ask their questions and apply scrutiny to every decision the BoE makes. If elected to the BOE. I will take the information to parents using a variety of mediums. I will not view hard feedback as an attack but more as an opportunity to learn and adjust systems or policies so that they best represent the needs of children and families.

What are the most important factors for student success? How will you, as a school board member, ensure that those factors are addressed?

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1. Individualized learning geared to address each child's needs. For too long, the American system of education has attempted to fit each child into one way of learning, with slight modifications based on special needs. Our district can explore ways to alter this so that education is child-driven. Instead of asking, “what is wrong with the way this child learns and how can we fix it?,” we need to start with the question, “what is wrong with the way we are teaching this child?”
2. Authentic safety created by a warm and welcoming environment that fosters meaningful friendships. And it also creates an atmosphere that promotes learning.. Safety is best developed in an atmosphere of respect and understanding among peers. We have to do a much better job in fostering that in ways children can understand. A child feels safest among friends and in environments that cater to how they think, learn, and live.
3. Education driven by passion and creativity, giving teachers the resources they need to inspire children to learn, and making learning something children look forward to. Now, especially, it is important that we continue to provide our students and teachers with the tools and technology they need to succeed and it is also important for the technology to mesh well with many learning types to fit the needs of a diverse group of students and be aligned to their developmental stages.
4. A well-rounded education that understands the importance of history, the arts, and literature, STEM and physical activity.. Standardized testing is important, but a comprehensive education that contributes to the cultivation of informed and compassionate children is also crucial. Thus, it is important to also maintain extra-curricular activities and other social events to ensure that students are also developing “soft skills” and a high emotional intelligence.
5. Diversity - Weaving diversity into school culture seamlessly so that children can learn to appreciate each other and learn through multiple cultures. Diversity is not a top-down concept. It is lateral and the product of interactions in natural contexts; appreciation for diversity is best created by using everyday opportunities that exist to bring children together in friendship. Diversity is an important framework to create a just and equitable society. As globalization continues and the need to interact competently with different cultures becomes more critical in almost every field.

How will you communicate with parents and others concerned with education? How do you plan to respond to concerns?

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As a Program Manager, I send daily, weekly, and monthly status updates. My communication plan is based on key stakeholders' needs. If elected, I propose to send a bi-weekly and monthly email updates to all parents. Also, I propose the provision of a monthly/quarterly update on "allocated budget spent" vs. "planned future needs" to all residents of Berkeley heights.

I also believe we need to move beyond email and controlled environments in speaking with parents. I would like to build upon some of the improvements made with regard to engaging in social media and meeting with parent, parent groups and residents outside of formal meeting environments face to face especially when impactful changes are being considered by the district.

As I indicated, concerns ought to be received assuming the best intent. I am open to constructive criticism, even if I disagree with the concern, to achieve a reasonable degree of compromise.

We should not approach problems with pre-determined solutions; any significant change ought to be the product of a process involving parents, children and educators with different beliefs and ideas coming to the table. External expertise is important, and data is critical, but the final authority on how something important should look are parents, children and teachers. Communication needs to occur throughout the process of any change, not at the end point. Change should be developed from the ground up, laterally, not top down.