

**League of Women Voters of Teaneck
2021 VOTERS GUIDE
Teaneck Board of Education**

Our voters' guide questionnaire and letter of invitation to the Candidates' Forum, sponsored by LWV Teaneck, was mailed to each of the candidates for Teaneck Board of Education in early September. 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 their answers to a total of 500 words or less:

- 1. What information would you suggest a BOE member have to assess how the district responded to students who regressed during the pandemic and/or those whose special education needs were negatively impacted by curriculum changes/school adjustments?**

- 2. What constructive suggestions do you have to help Teaneck Public Schools adapt to lingering COVID challenges and the changing world and workforce its students will graduate into?**

- 3. How many BOE meetings have you attended in the past few years, and what is your understanding of the Board's legal functions & limitations as proscribed by NJ state law?**

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

Dennis Klein, 1178 East Laurelton Parkway

Years residing in Teaneck: 35

Occupation: Professor, Kean University

Education: BA Hobart College / MA, Ph.D. University of Rochester

Family: Married to Libby Klein; three children, Aaron, Leah, and Rachel (Leah, THS class of 2004 / Rachel THS class of 2008); seven grandchildren

Record of Community Involvement:

- Founding chair, Fair Trade Teaneck (the 26th Fair Trade Town in the USA)
- THS Forum advisory board
- Restorative practices pilot initiative (Restorative practices for educators' certification)
- Co-Chair, Jewish Community Relations Council
- NJ Human Relations Council Executive Committee
- Consulting partner, The Trust Network

1. The primary vital step is a report by the superintendent: What were his team's measures to support TPS students? How quickly did they implement them? Where did they fall short of providing regulations and retrofitting? What could they have done differently? What resources do we need to sustain the safest environment possible? Did they explore and implement best practices?

It is also imperative that the BOE set up a commission to invite teachers, staff, and parents to report, confidentially, on the success or failure of the district's response, a report that, in turn, would open a dialogue with the superintendent and his team in order to reach an understanding of learning deficits and a blueprint for remedies.

2. By accelerating the deployment of technology and platforms, the pandemic compelled our students to refine their tech skills and the district to consider innovated instructional practices. It is important, then, to evaluate the role of technology in how we teach and how we learn and to center instructional innovation in teachers' professional development. That said, we must at the same time balance technology with face-to-face instruction, for we must not sacrifice what is most precious – the very human activity of interaction and finesse.

The pandemic also illuminated inequities that we could no longer shun. While I believe that success for all students is a synthesis of equity and individual potential, it is clearer now than before that some students are disfranchised by circumstances that prevent them from full and joyous participation in the learning enterprise. We must ensure that all students have the technological hardware and software support, but it is also necessary to exercise portfolio assessments in order to support learning differences, a range of pedagogical modalities, and varying paces of learning.

3. I have attended four to five meetings when the questions were ones that demanded my attention; namely, strategic priorities, student conduct, community service, and measures for dealing with the pandemic. At most of these meetings I requested answers to urgent questions: What steps is the district taking to assure academic excellence? How can we integrate restorative practices in order to create a positive student environment? What opportunities do students have to intern at local services and businesses? How can we control for contact tracing? Can we promote projects that join public school students with students in private and charter schools for the benefit of all students? What do we need to do to strengthen special education in order to keep our students in the district and closer to their homes?

The Board plays a critical role in the consummation of academic excellence: It sets policy, provides oversight, and demands the superintendent's accountability. In order to function efficiently, however, the Board must evaluate its procedures to define priorities, justify budgetary allocations, and negotiate fairly with the district's staff. In addition, the Board should create a committee devoted to faculty morale, mentoring, retention, and

compensation and another committee to improve communications in order to apprise all residents of TPS accomplishments.

Victoria Fisher, 654 Pomander Walk

Years residing in Teaneck: 30+

Occupation: Research Scientist and Union Representative

Education: THS (2000), Masters in Public Administration, Rutgers School of Public Affairs and Administration; B.A. Douglass College, Rutgers University

Family: Married to Gregory for 13 years; Children: Theodore, student at Bryant School, and Lilith, still toddling

Record of Community Involvement:

- Vice-Chair, Teaneck Democratic Municipal Committee
- Lifetime Member, Girl Scouts USA
- Co-Chair, Teaneck Municipal Alliance Against Substance Abuse
- Co-founder, Coalition to Unite Teaneck
- Trustee, Teaneck Board of Education; Chair, Finance Committee

1. The most pressing task facing Board of Education Trustees everywhere is pandemic recovery. Teaneck was devastated by COVID-19. We have endured eighteen months of loss, grief and isolation. The Board must address the resulting academic, social and emotional needs of our students as we cautiously proceed into uncharted waters.

Measuring our students' academic needs requires both quantitative and qualitative data. There are standardized test results to consider, some of which allow us to track students' progress year by year. Other data points should include graduation rates and cumulative GPAs, as well as participation rates for the summer academies, which allowed teachers to refer students who were struggling for extra, in-person help.

We must also study qualitative data that has been collected through student & parent surveys and staying in touch with the community helps to provide anecdotal data, which may support or challenge the results provided by administrators. Additionally, I personally find it important to review other, comparable districts to help provide context.

2. If there is a silver lining to COVID, it is that we have proven that public schools can adapt and change in ways previously thought impossible. We witnessed our teachers and staff adjust to meet the needs of our students through technology, one-on-one lessons, independent study, and differentiated learning paths. We must capitalize on this momentum and work with our staff, families, community leaders, and academic experts to retain this spirit of innovation, in and out of the classrooms.

We must also continue to hold the attention of parents and guardians who spent almost a year by their children's side as they learned remotely. Parents have never had so much access to our classrooms and teachers, and if we can retain that interest, we can continue to use it to expand opportunities for our students.

3. I take my responsibility to our students and community very seriously; therefore, I am nearly always present and prepared. I have attended every BOE Agenda, Workshop and committee meeting to which I am assigned; the only exceptions were for illness and the meeting after I gave birth to my daughter.

I have participated in six trainings with the NJ School Boards Association, as well as many workshops, which clearly delineate the Board's functions and limitations under the law. We have an important policymaking role as well as oversight functions on both the budget and the performance of the Superintendent, the Board's sole employee. On a day-to-day basis, we receive reports which advise us on how well policies are implemented. Additionally, the Board's Finance Committee, which I currently Chair, regularly reviews accounts, bills and payments to ensure that the budget is adhered to.

Rachel Secemski, 882 Helen Street

Years residing in Teaneck: 17 years

Occupation: Physical Therapist

Education: B.S. in Health Sciences, Touro College (2003); Doctorate in Physical Therapy, Touro College (2006)

Family: Husband - Gabriel Secemski; Children: Anna, 13; Brady, 8; Madison & Tyler, 5

Record of Community Involvement:

- * Sisterhood President at Congregation Ahavat Shalom 2006-2008
- * Event volunteer at Congregation Shaare Tefillah 2017- 2021
- * Providing pro- bono Physical Therapy services to Teaneck community members, 2020- Present
- * Volunteer for Friendship Circle of Bergen County for Teaneck based events, 2018- Present

1. This question is very personal to me, as my child in special education at TPS suffered significant regression. I will start by saying that the decisions made to keep special education students and early learners out of the classroom will impact them negatively for the foreseeable future. I highly doubt that any student in TPS, general education, special education and inclusion, did not suffer some sort of regression during quarantine, whether it be social- emotional, academic or involving mental health. Regarding addressing academic regression in general ed students, we need to look at effective means of educating children who lost out on academics. Research has shown that a scaffolding approach is an effective tool in moving forward with curriculum. This method was shown to be effective in students who lost learning post hurricane Katrina. Our special ed

students will need close monitoring by teachers, paraprofessionals and therapists. Special ed will struggle with a scaffolding approach. These students need to have individual academic assessments and their IEP goals need adjustment to where their educational and functional needs are today.

2. First and foremost, we need to support our children as we all make the return to normalcy. We need to have an effective plan in place within our school buildings that follow CDC guidelines, but also make sense. Continuously quarantining students without direct exposure will only continue to impact them negatively. We need to limit the number of distractions inside our classrooms. This includes removing plexiglass barriers at students' desks. Our children are already expected to be masked at all times inside their classrooms. Barriers on the desk made for added distraction and an uncomfortable learning environment. We need to offer academic and mental health supports to our students and families outside of school hours. We have had a difficult few years in our country. Although children can be highly adaptable, they can also be very impressionable. Staff of the Teaneck BOE need to continuously be good role models for our students. Giving our HS students the tools they need to become successful in their careers needs to be a priority as well. The FORUM continues to be a wonderful program to help students prepare for today's workforce.

3. I have attended all BOE meetings since the start of COVID-19 in March 2020. I was invested in the well being of my child's academic and social-emotional impact during this time. The special education community took a very strong interest in board decisions at this time.

As a board member, we are not to run to school but oversee that they are being run well. The administration is responsible for the day-to-day operations, and we are to set the policy, curriculum, budget and ask the important questions to ensure our students succeed. We are also responsible for ensuring the superintendent is performing to his optimal level.

Jonathan Rodriguez, 1140 Congress Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: total of 25 years (moved back 4 years ago)

Occupation: Teacher of Performing Arts at North Star Academy in Newark NJ;

Teacher of Musical Theater at Mayo Performing Arts Center, Morristown NJ;

Teacher for the Miracle Project (also at the Mayo Performing Arts Center);

Private vocal & Acting coach; Band manager/coordinator for Atomic Funk Project

Education: THS (2001); BFA/Musical Theater, University of the Arts (2005)

Family: Wife Andrea, 2 sons (ages 5 & 3 months).

Parents also have lived in town for the majority of their lives (both THS grads)

Record of Community Involvement:

- * Longtime volunteer member of John Harms Performing Arts Company
- * Teacher at “The Miracle Project” for theater classes to students on the autism spectrum and other special needs.
- * Volunteered to assistant direct the musical at the THS (which was later shut down due to COVID)
- * Participated in numerous social justice events

1. We’d need to compare expectations vs reality as far as achievement is concerned. Then we must take that information and compare it to previous years pre-COVID as well as to other school districts’ outcomes.

For all students, but especially our special education students, my main concern is their mental and emotional health. We’ve all been distressed during the pandemic, and our special education students will need the most help adjusting to their renewed “in-person” world.

2. My suggestion is to go one step at a time. While we all want to reach our endgame of helping the students who fell behind catch up, there truly is no telling what those lingering COVID challenges look like yet. At the end of the day patience and understanding matched with high expectations will be our way towards normalcy.

3. As far as BOE meetings, I attend whenever possible.

As far as the second part of this question, the board of education’s function is policy development. Those policies govern all operations within our school system and must comply with all the guidelines set by the state of NJ. We are limited since we do not actually run the day in and out operations of the schools, but it’s our responsibility to ensure that they are set up to run well.

Laura Fein, 277 Johnson Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: 14 years

Occupation: Attorney and Non-Profit Management

Education: Harvard College, AB Magna Cum Laude; Harvard Undergraduate Teacher Education Program (UTEP); Columbia Law School, Stone Scholar, Olin Scholar; Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Certificate of Philanthropy

Family: Married to Martin Ramirez; Mother of five daughters aged 21, 19, 17, 14, 12; Siblings, nieces, nephews in Teaneck and Demarest; Mother in Cherry Hill

Record of Community Involvement:

- Former Community Relations Director for Jewish Federation
- *Former legal advocate for children in child welfare system

- Pro bono advocate for probation hearings
- Parent-teacher organizations (multiple)
- Education Committee, Ben Porat Yosef
- Synagogue volunteer (Children’s activities, nominating committee, compensation committee)
- Volunteer Interviewer for Harvard College Volunteer for Harvard University & Columbia Law School
- Board Member, Harvard Hillel

1. BOE members need information on student academic levels, to be determined by assessment testing. BOE also needs to review the types of special needs that are, and are not, being met. Teaneck needs a multi-year plan to continuously evaluate and remediate the learning losses. It is likely that 3-5 years will be needed to restore the 2020-2021 learning losses and reach where levels would have been without the covid gap. Some changes may be covered by federal or state funding. Other changes may require re-prioritizing spending to cover the costs of boosting academic achievement. Possible remedies include additional hours of instruction, either with longer school days or additional instructional days; availability of instructional software or classes to reinforce classroom learning; reduction in time for non-academic courses until fundamentals are returned to acceptable levels in core subjects; or partnership with private providers of supplemental education, possibly with funding for parents to enroll their children in such courses. Special education students encompass a broad range of needs and are subject to Individual Education Plans. The BOE should work with the Superintendent to ensure those completing these evaluations, establishing IEPs, and executing the plans have the supervision, resources, and accountability needed for this difficult task.

An excellent foundation in math, reading, writing, science, and analytical skills is the best possible preparation for the swiftly changing world and workplaces our students will encounter, whatever profession they pursue.

2. As much as COVID presents challenges, it also presents opportunities. A longstanding problem in our schools has been low levels of academic achievement in core subjects. During this period of remediation, we have an opportunity to reset priorities as well.

Prior to the pandemic, about 40% of Teaneck students did not meet proficiency in English Language Arts, and nearly 60% did not meet that level in Math, per state reports (58.1% & 42.6% proficiency rate for Federal accountability in 2018-19). This is not attributable to demographic factors, as the Teaneck Community Charter School has similar demographics and achieves far higher proficiency in both English and Math (77.6% and 63.1% in 2018-19). In all likelihood, unless the standards for each grade are “reset” (ie lowered), our students will have even lower levels of achievement next year.

I suggest the BOE focus on increasing hours of instruction and frequency of evaluation in core subjects and rewarding academic achievement in students and the faculty who deliver results.

Once our students are achieving their best in foundational skills, we should offer career-oriented courses in a variety of professions, including various trades, technology, business, health care fields, and pre-collegiate course work.

3. I've attended a number of board meetings, both in the past year and previously while my husband served on the BOE. The Board's role is to set policy, approve budget and funding, and provide oversight to ensure the Superintendent's work is consistent with those policies and priorities. The BOE has no direct managerial role in the administration of the district or supervision of faculty, which are the work of the Superintendent.

Darryl Greene, 82 Ayers Court #3C

Years residing in Teaneck: 45 years

Occupation: Technology Sales and Producer/Executive Producer for Scripted and Un-Scripted Film and Television Content

Education: Teaneck High School, Pace University

Family: Proud Grandfather. My daughter is married with two children; one graduate of Teaneck HS class of 2020 and the second grandson is a freshman in Teaneck HS

Record of Community Involvement:

- Helped established the first Teaneck Boys and Girls Club in 2017.
- Member of the Teaneck Planning Board
- 12-year Board Member TCT (Teaneck Comes Together)
- Brokered the deal between Teaneck Board of Education & Christ Episcopal Church for the Teaneck Pre-K Program.
- Organizer/Producer for June 2021 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame recipients, The Isley Brothers
- Organizer/Producer of the October 2020 Street Naming Ceremony on Walraven Drive entitled "BeSpoke/Dre Perrin Way" recognizing one of Teaneck's Oldest Black-Owned Businesses "Bespoke Men's Grooming"
- Co-Founder/Administrator: "You Know You are from Teaneck" social media group
- Organizer/Promoter of Summer 2020 Food Distribution at 50 Oakdene Ave in Teaneck

1. By October 15th the state will require every student in the state tested. The students will be tested in areas such as Math & English. We need access to that data to see what

areas the students need to improve. Teaneck has an assessment program called “Start Strong”

2. The district should continue to work with Township Manager to help support Covid's response at a Township level.

3. I have attended several BOE meetings when my schedule permits.

The Board is a policy-making body.

1) Create a Policy's to steer students to better achievements.

2) Hire and Fire Superintendents

Yassine Elkaryani, 735 Elm Avenue #2B

Years residing in Teaneck: 11 years

Occupation: Business owner, information technology consultant, financial service product agent.

Education: Master's of Business Administration (FDU/Teaneck);
Project Management Professional (PMP); Securities Industry Essentials (FINRA);
Life Insurance Licenses

Family:

Record of Community Involvement:

- Teaneck Municipal Government's Advisory Board on Community Relations – Chair
- Teaneck Youth Advisory Board - Adult 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
- Mymaroc.org - Youth Committee Co-founder

1. I believe most students have regressed during the pandemic due to the nature of instruction they received and the lack of socializing.

To assess the district's responses, I think the Board members can rely on the following information:

- Reports from the Mental Health Services Program.
- Feedback from athletic coaches, teachers, and parents.
- Test scores: we can compare to previous years and neighboring districts.
- For the special needs students, we can also look at the number of parents who have decided to take their children out of the district and compare it to previous years.

2. COVID definitely has had a severe impact on the mental health of our students, teachers, staff, etc. I believe we need district-wide mental health assessment and further training for the teachers and parents to be alert to any behavioral changes or signs of mental issues.

From another angle, the job market is changing. Employers today are looking for employees with critical skills, the job market is geared towards STEM, college is not for everyone, there is more access to capital, and the middle class in America is more indebted.

As a personal finance coach, I believe by high-school graduation, a teenager should understand finance basics: compound interest, personal budgeting, bonds, equity, insurance, etc.

While I believe that the standard for higher education is a four-year degree, we must realize that not everyone is fit for college, and we ought to understand those few students' uniqueness without vilifying them or their families for their choices. Information technology (IT) professionals such as myself understand that certifications are in a lot of occasions more valuable than degrees in our industry. We therefore need to provide students with opportunities to take training/classes to learn about specific lines of work (IT, plumbing, etc.)

Also, I would love to see an elective on entrepreneurship where students learn how to seek investors, debt (for business), how to create a business plan or business model canvas, how to pitch their ideas, etc.

3. I have not counted the number of meetings I have attended, but I have had an approach where I attended the meetings I thought were important, I went through the minutes from the last two years and watched the videos of the meetings where I thought I need to watch the video to learn more.

As to the role of a board of education trustee, he/she is an official who is directly elected by the people and must serve as the barometer of the people in the eyes of the school district and represent the interest of the people, without distinction. Simultaneously, a board of education trustee is a representative of the state who is empowered to perform a state function: governing public schools at the local level.

BOE trustees implement a lot of the aforementioned items through policies that guide the superintendent, who serves as the "CEO" of the schools. Like the saying goes: the superintendent runs the school district, and the board makes sure the district is run well.

ELECTION DAY

Tuesday, November 2nd

LWV Candidates Forum, Thursday Oct. 14th (ZOOM)
https://us06web.zoom.us/.../reg.../WN_jldkJ4GZQ1OUlaMwnqwY2Q

This VOTER 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 local Teaneck league -- which is celebrating our 70th anniversary this year! -- 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.