



# Candidates Guide for Ridgewood Board of Education Election 2020

**ELECTION DAY:  
TUESDAY, MAY 12<sup>th</sup>**

## CANDIDATES:



- ✓ Dan Creed
- ✓ Saurabh Dani
- ✓ HyunJu Kwak
- ✓ Michael W. Lembo
- ✓ Muhammad Mahmoud



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[WWW.LWVRIDGEWOODNJ.ORG](http://WWW.LWVRIDGEWOODNJ.ORG)**

*Disclaimer: The League of Women Voters of Ridgewood does not write, research or fact check the candidates' statements, but rather publishes them verbatim as submitted by the candidates. The statements do not necessarily reflect any official policy or position of The League of Women Voters of Ridgewood.*

## Candidate Profile: Dan Creed

### Address:

897 Hillcrest Road

### Facebook Page:

danmcreed@gmail.com

### Website:

danmcreed@gmail.com

### Years Residing in Ridgewood:

10

### Occupational Background:

Semi-Retired. Fortune 500 Executive

### Education:

Bachelor of Social Sciences- Political Science & US History

### Family:

Spouse Jennifer, 3 children- Jonathan (RHS 2015), James (RHS 2018), Lauren (RHS 2022)

### Record of Community Involvement:

- Evans Scholar Foundation
- MGA Caddie Foundation



## Candidate Profile: **Saurabh Dani**

### Address:

390 Bedford Road

### Facebook Page:

[www.facebook.com/TogetherForRidgewood](http://www.facebook.com/TogetherForRidgewood)

### Website:

<http://www.voteboe.com/>

### Years Residing in Ridgewood:

Six (April 2014)

### Occupational Background:

Director, Technology Product Management

### Education:

MBA, Stern School of Business, NYU; Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Sciences, Jai Narayan Vyas University, India

### Family:

Spouse, Sonal, and two children currently attending Ridgewood public schools, Shriya, 9th grade and Nandita, 5th grade.

### Record of Community Involvement:

- 4th of July Organizing Committee, Member
- Ridgewood Citizens for Reasonable Development, Member
- Garage Referendum: Petitioner and Its2Big Organizer
- Ridgewood Indian Community- organized Diwali, Holi and food drive events
- Regularly attends and speaks at Board of Education and Village Council meetings
- Researches local issues and concerns, provides information to the community, and communicates with the Board of Education trustees on these matters



## Candidate Profile: **HyunJu Kwak**

### Address:

291 Highland Avenue

### Facebook Page:

<https://facebook.com/TogetherForRidgewood>

### Website:

[www.voteBOE.com](http://www.voteBOE.com)

### Years Residing in Ridgewood:

10

### Occupational Background:

Castle Point Ventures: Private real estate and early venture investments

Merrill Lynch: Equity Research

NBC, CNBC, CNBC.com: Corporate and internet business development

Bain & Co.: Corporate strategy for Fortune 500 firms

### Education:

M.B.A. in Finance and Strategic Management, Wharton School of University of Pennsylvania

B.A., magna cum laude, Brown University

Visiting Scholar, Oxford University

### Family:

Steve (husband), Audrey and Christie (ages 14 and 11 respectively)

### Record of Community Involvement:

- Girl Scout Troop Leader
- Children's Aid and Family Services: Spring Gala Committee
- Eva's Village
- Covenant House



## Candidate Profile: **Michael W. Lembo**

### Address:

445 Van Buren Street

### Facebook Page:

[www.fb.me/TogetherforRidgewood](http://www.fb.me/TogetherforRidgewood)

### Website:

[www.voteBOE.com](http://www.voteBOE.com)

### Years Residing in Ridgewood:

40

### Occupational Background:

Ridgewood Police Officer (Detective Sergeant)

### Education:

Ridgewood High School '97; University of Scranton BA '01; Marist College MPA '20

### Family:

My wife, Colleen; 2 sons, Anthony and Liam; Anthony is 1st grader at Travell, Liam is currently at the RED program at Glen School. (My Parents, Brother, Sister-in-law, Niece and Nephew, and some cousins all live in the Village)

### Record of Community Involvement:

- Ridgewood Police Department
- Ridgewood Emergency Services/Ambulance Corps
- Boy Scouts (Life Scout, Pack 5 in Ridgewood, currently active Pack 12 with my children)
- Ridgewood PBA (Junior Police Academy Coordinator, Knights of Columbus Stickball Tournament, Fall Cancer Fundraisers, Special Olympics Polar Bear Plunge Special Olympics Plane Pull, Basketball Tournaments, current Health care donations)
- Parishioner at Mt. Carmel Church



## Candidate Profile: **Muhammad Mahmoud**

### Address:

230 Fairfield Avenue

### Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/mahmoud4boe/>

### Website:

None

### Years Residing in Ridgewood:

2017 to Present

### Occupational Background:

Currently Sales Director, Enterprise Strategic Accounts at Salesforce. Previously Senior Account Executive at SAP; Enterprise Solutions Sales at Bloomberg; and Account Manager at Cisco.

### Education:

Rutgers University (2005), BA in Political Science and Economics (dual major)

### Family:

Married, five children (RHS, Travell)

### Record of Community Involvement:

- Ridgewood Board of Education (October 2019 to Present)
- Travell School parent volunteer
- Ridgewood interfaith community
- Giving Thanks Elder Dinner at Old Paramus Reformed Church
- Founded and led ICPC Youth Services from 2004–2009 focusing on at-risk youth in Paterson





**Question 1: Given the school population of approximately 6000 students and a proposed budget of 115.2 million dollars, what qualities and experiences will you bring to the Board of Education, if elected, and why do you want to serve on the Board?**



**Dan Creed**

First and foremost, I am running in the hope of being able to preserve, and ultimately improve the great quality of our school system. With that said, we are at a crossroads. I look at being a taxpayer in Ridgewood as a bit of a three-legged stool- our school system, our property taxes that fund our school system, and our property values which underpin what for most of us is our largest asset.

I think we all know deep down that the current and future trajectory of our school budget is not sustainable unless we are willing to see our property taxes increase in the neighborhood of 30-40% over the next five years. Needless to say, every dollar in property taxes in excess of the rate of inflation will come at the expense of the value of our homes. As the events of the last month have shown us, we cannot always rely on a booming stock market, historically low unemployment, and ever increasing real estate values. We must figure this out.

What I can bring to the Board of Education are three fundamental things.

1. I have had three children go through the Ridgewood schools. I think it is critical to have the experience of having children who have experienced all that our schools have to offer. My two sons were extremely active in lacrosse and football and my daughter is enthusiastically involved in the arts through New Players.
2. I have 25+ years of executive experience and have routinely dealt with budgets in excess of our school budget- I will bring a creative yet focused approach to the task at hand, which is funding our schools in a way that is fiscally prudent and not reliant on one-time shortcuts and/or kicking the can down the road.
3. I am running because I truly fear that the path we are on is simply not sustainable. In a perfect world, I would like to see my children watch their children walk down that graduation hill at RHS.



**Saurabh Dani**

“My ongoing support for local government coupled with my passion for giving back to our community have steadily fueled my interest and participation in BOE business over the years. I attend and participate in BOE meetings regularly.”

My appreciation for the value of a public school education began with my parents, who were both teachers. My own public school education changed my life, affording me the opportunity to immigrate from India 21 years ago to realize the American dream. Humble beginnings taught me the importance of making what you have go a long way, a great foundation for a steward of taxpayers' dollars. Fiscal prudence and educational excellence are not mutually exclusive.

My goal is to ensure that the best education possible is provided to district students. It is critically important that decisions are made with complete transparency. Taxpayers' concerns and rights must be respected and appropriately responded to. As a community member, I have been a strong and consistent advocate for this, committing countless hours of my time to learn about BOE business and participating in discussions of these important issues. As a BOE trustee, I would work tirelessly for the entire community to ensure that these standards are met.”



**HyunJu Kwak**

“I truly benefited from the New Jersey public education system. I'm eager to use my skills and professional training to serve our community. As an immigrant with degrees from Brown and Wharton, I know the uplifting power of a quality public education and Ridgewood schools' mission of "Tradition of Excellence" resonates with me in a profound, personal way. I'm eager to contribute by applying the skills I gained as a strategy consultant and as a financial analyst. I will strive to find effective and efficient ways to deliver first-rate education while adhering to fiscal efficiency. Working together, I will be attentive to students' well-being and safety. Serving on the BOE, for me, means developing solutions to maximize the learning experience of our students within a responsible financial model. It would be an honor to be entrusted with this work.”





**Michael W.  
Lembo**

Service has always played an integral role in my family, and in my own life. I have a long history of service to the Village. Coming from a law enforcement background, I would bring a valuable ingredient to board discussions, which are so important in these ever-changing times. There's always room for improvement when it comes to safety in our schools. Our students deserve the most secure environment to learn in that we can provide. I have worked in government for the past 16 years, and have a master's degree in Public Administration. My work experience, community involvement experience, and enthusiasm are all part of what I hope to contribute to our Board of Education. I look forward to the opportunity to promote fiscal responsibility while exploring new programs to enrich our students. I want very much to be a true representative of our community on the board and understand that listening and responding to the needs of our residents is an important part of that. This position carries with it a duty to guide our children to become the leaders of tomorrow and an obligation to the parents who entrust us with that responsibility.



**Muhammad  
Mahmoud**

As the only candidate currently serving on the Board of Education, I have gained considerable insight into and experience with the issues facing the Ridgewood public schools. My children attend the Ridgewood schools, which has given me additional first-hand insights as a parent and user of the system. I am also the only current BOE member with a student at RHS, which is home to one-third of our public school population and which has its own unique challenges. In my professional career, I have led multi-million-dollar books of business for Fortune 500 companies. I know how to manage large budgets and to work with extended teams to drive toward common goals and objectives. Three of five BOE seats are up for election, and as the only candidate who is a current BOE member, I offer both continuity and vision for the sake of our schools, students, and families during the challenging times ahead. More importantly, in my six months of service as a BOE member, I have been able to impact change and implement new programs that will benefit our children, specifically a successful anti-vaping platform at RHS.



**Question 2: The Board of Education is planning to propose a \$95,000,000 bond referendum, which has been divided into three categories:**

<b>High Priority Projects</b>	<b>\$59,085,345</b>
<b>Secondary Additional Projects</b>	<b>\$7,379,724</b>
<b>Performing Arts Center</b>	<b>\$29,277,000</b>

**Recent discussions at Board meetings have shown some concerns about the overall amount of the bond. What are your views on any/all aspects, inclusive of cost, of the bond referendum?**



**Muhammad  
Mahmoud**

During my six-month tenure on the Board, I have pushed not only for more scrutiny on the proposed numbers from our architect firm but also for a second opinion and a more detailed analysis. As a result, the Superintendent and Board have decided to postpone the discussion and decision on these items until we are able to address and answer many outstanding questions. In addition, I have pushed the Board to commit to quarterly transparency reports to the Ridgewood community IF the referendum projects are approved and actioned. The Board has not approved any referendum projects and if/when it does, the decision will be put forward to the voters of Ridgewood to decide on. So this will ultimately be the decision of the Ridgewood community.

There is no doubt that our schools need to upgrade their HVAC systems, which are 30 to 50 years old. There is also no doubt that we need a new auditorium and facilities for our music departments. Currently, three music groups practice in space for two, and the auditorium at RHS is severely inadequate. However, \$30 million is a lot of money and we should be asking for second opinions and alternative design options that are more cost-effective and will meet the needs of our RHS community.



**Dan Creed**

In my opinion, the cost of the proposed referendum is simply a non-starter. If passed, our debt will have gone from roughly \$8m in 2009 to roughly \$150m in 2022.

With that said, we have to acknowledge that our schools have real needs and we need to make our schools safe and functional.

My approach is simple. I fully support a “forced rank” approach whereby EVERY need will be put on a master list and the administration will be asked to rank, in priority, each and every project. Only then will we be able to have a realistic look at what are the “must have” and what are the “nice to have” projects. Once the master list has been presented, vetted, and approved by a Board vote, the list will be locked down and we will start to plan capital projects from that list, in the order in which they are listed.

The benefit of this approach would be to keep our overall debt level somewhat consistent and NOT BURDEN THE NEXT GENERATION with unsustainable debt.



**Saurabh Dani**

Providing every necessity for RPS students is paramount. However, with the sustainability of our public schools at stake, we must practice fiscal responsibility, ever cognizant of the ongoing and future demands we make of Ridgewood taxpayers. The entire referendum must now be reconsidered in light of the economic impact that the current health crisis will have on our community.

I have advocated for a reform of the referendum process over the past two years, while striving to keep our community informed. I am the only candidate for the BOE who attended all facility tours and meetings related to this referendum. As a direct result of my efforts, changes in the referendum process are now being considered. Right now, all of our business goes to one vendor, which avoids competition. This does not serve the best interests of the community, particularly the users of our schools.

As a board trustee, I would support:

- More in depth differentiating “needs” from “wants”.
- Staggering spend on “needs” over time, fundraising for “wants.”
- A robust bidding process ensuring the best value for what we are spending. **[continued on next page]**



**Saurabh Dani**

**[Continued]** The current proposal will take our debt utilization to 56% of our borrowing capacity on the 30-year bond. That would reduce our ability to borrow for future emergencies, a risk we cannot afford to take.



**HyunJu Kwak**

Given the current pandemic crisis, all plans regarding the referendum must be revisited keeping in mind the financial fallout for our residents.

Even without that added concern, I believe a \$95.7 million bond referendum could jeopardize the quality of education as more funds would then be allocated to debt service and siphoned away from student education. Adding the said amount in debt would likely triple the debt service to \$8 to \$10 million a year, resulting in a projected 5% decline in spending towards student education. Meanwhile, the borrowing would increase residents' school portion of the property taxes by about 5% on top of the customary school budget tax increase.

An earlier assessment identified \$19 million in high priority projects versus \$59 million currently proposed. The Board needs to reconcile the two plans, understand the cost drivers behind the \$40 million gap, prioritize projects line by line, and pursue smaller, as-needed referendums. This way, more funds budgeted would directly flow to student education instead of debt service.

No referendum this size has ever passed in the history of Bergen County, and this is not the time to push the limit of our school district's balance sheet.



**Michael W. Lembo**

It all comes down to needs vs. wants and whether all of the identified needs are actually warranted at once. We need a clear breakdown of where the money is going to be spent and how it impacts the students. If there is a clear need for a project and the numbers are right, I would support it, but if the numbers and needs aren't there, I would question it. In light of the current health crisis, this entire bond must be looked at once again, taking into account how that burden will further impact our now financially strained community.



**Question 3: Orchard Field is in the process of a mandatory remediation due to historic fill that has tested positive for elevated levels of PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons.) What is your position on the proposed installation at Stevens Field of a new crumb rubber field which also contains PAHs and other compounds? Would you consider alternative materials and what efforts would you make to ensure that our kids play on safe fields?**



**Michael W.  
Lembo**

The Steven's Field turf, as other fields in town, needs to be replaced as recommended. The levels of PAHs in Stevens field are not comparable to the Orchard School field. I would fully vet all concerns raised and all credible information made available while considering any alternatives that are safer for our children and more environmentally responsible. However, if the health and environmental standards are being met, I would support the plan currently in place. Maple Field was replaced recently by the Village, and if it proves to be a better alternative, I'd want to look into that. I believe turf is still better and easier to maintain than grass fields in areas such as Stevens that are used quite frequently.



**Muhammad  
Mahmoud**

I have already pushed the Board and Superintendent to explore alternative materials with the turf vendors that are safer for our children and more environmentally friendly. On the Orchard soil remediation project, I called for immediate action and more accountability and transparency to the community. As a result:

- Orchard fields were closed immediately
- There was collaboration with experts from the Orchard community to validate and adjust our approach as needed
- The Orchard community has received frequent updates
- A second written opinion confirmed our remediation plans (NJDOH has confirmed this in writing as well)



**Dan Creed**

First and foremost, I would rely on scientific data to guide our decisions. Moreover, I think it is important to stress that the very unfortunate situation at Orchard Field has NOTHING to do with the proposed re-turfing of Stevens Field. We must be careful not to cause undue concern or panic vis a vis Stevens Field by linking it to Orchard.

With that said, I think we should take a good faith look at the turf fill alternatives for Stevens Field as a simple matter of good governance. If we can use a fill that provides for a safer and/or better experience for our athletes, I am all for it.



**Saurabh Dani**

I have requested that the current board hold a public hearing to gather input from residents and experts in an open forum before making a decision. Residents who have come forward to speak about artificial turf concerns at the BOE meetings have been ignored. Such an important decision should not be made at a closed-door Facilities Committee meeting where no minutes are recorded.

There are various infill products available. While they may increase cost by about 10%, they would be more environmentally responsible than crumb rubber, especially in a flood zone. I fully support taking all credible information into account with this very important decision.



**HyunJu Kwak**

This is not an issue of whether or not to re-turf Stevens Field. What the Orchard Field soil remediation project has clearly reminded us is that we should not take any shortcuts when it comes to the safety of the students and residents. There are more products available and an ever-increasing body of research on the product category. The Superintendent has confirmed that the crumb rubber field product selected for Stevens Field carries the same carcinogenic components as those at Orchard Field. Even more alarming, the product was selected with zero community input and the vendor selected for Stevens Field has pending lawsuits. *It is troubling that the current school budget allocates \$600,000 to re-turf Stevens Field using materials with known toxins, while also allocating \$600,000 to remediate toxins as identified by NJDEP at Orchard Field.* I support soliciting expert and public input and conducting thorough research using data from the Department of Environmental Protection and other agencies to determine the safest product for Stevens Field.



**Question 4: Employing substitute teachers in the High School would cost the district approximately \$200,000 per year, according to a calculation by the League of Women Voters of Ridgewood's Education Committee. Would you implement this change in policy, or do you support the district's existing policy of allowing students to have unstructured free time when teachers call in with unplanned absences?**



**HyunJu Kwak**

This encompasses two issues: (1) free periods in lieu of substitutes and (2) Open Campus. I support the current policy of free periods when teachers are absent, and assigning substitutes when teachers will be absent for more than 3 days. This teacher absence procedure empowers the students to manage their work, and submit online assignments directly to the teacher. However, concerns have been raised regarding the Open Campus policy allowing students to be unaccounted for during free periods. This concern suggests that additional community feedback could be helpful in refining the policy further.



**Michael W. Lembo**

The policy concerning teacher's absences has changed a few times over the past few years. In 2009, two permanent substitutes were hired at an estimated savings of \$150 - \$200k. One of the biggest issues with this was finding highly qualified individuals to fill, and remain in these positions. In 2016, the policy was changed once again. Online assignments are provided when a teacher is absent. When a teacher is absent for more than three days in a row, a substitute is provided. Students found this to be positive, affording them more free time to complete their assignments and more independence. Dr. Gorman reported no decrease in student scores and there was a decrease in disciplinary issues. However, parents have expressed concern with how much time this allows students to be unaccounted for and that should be addressed by the board. After two full years of the new policy, it should be reevaluated.



**Muhammad Mahmoud**

Who would have thought that we would all be confined to our homes and many of us actively working and studying from home because of Covid-19? The corporate world today, as well as the world of higher education, revolves around independence and outcome-based productivity. Ridgewood's current 1:1 technology model enables our students to take responsibility for their work and deliverables. Since implementing this model (in 2012), RHS has seen a significant drop in HIB (harassment, intimidation, and bullying) because students are no longer confined to one large common area. There has also been an increase in student maturity/learning and readiness for college—which is readily acknowledged by college admissions personnel. In addition, the district has saved money and has better prepared students for the current virtual learning environment that we have unexpectedly found ourselves in—which many other districts are struggling to catch up with.



**Dan Creed**

On this topic, I will rely on the expertise of our school administration. I believe we have a very capable executive team and we have to trust their judgement.



**Saurabh Dani**

We must consider what educational value our students are getting for that spend and the current policy's impact on them.

The current policy at RHS provides substitutes for teachers absent more than three days consecutively. Otherwise, students are assigned online work, time stamped or due the following day, when a teacher is absent. Data presented at a 2018 BOE meeting suggests that there is no negative educational impact resulting from this policy.

However, parents have expressed concern regarding the "open campus" component of the policy. This should be discussed at a public meeting, including consideration of the data collected since the implementation of the policy, while welcoming feedback from our community.





**Question 5: Student wellness and Social Emotional Learning are ongoing topics of concern within the District. What are your ideas for improving the physical and mental wellness of our students, inclusive of policies regarding bullying and intimidation in our schools and possible later start time related to sleep studies?**



**Saurabh Dani**

Our District promotes student growth in the areas of self and social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. We should further promote tolerance, respect, and citizenship amongst students and provide supporting professional development opportunities to teachers.

Bullying and intimidation issues continue to be raised by students and parents. There is an underlying concern that certain issues continue because they are “swept under the rug”. As long as that concern remains, the board is obligated to address it, putting student safety and well-being before any perceived obstacles to appropriately resolving these issues and preventing recurrences. The board must adopt procedures that deal with these concerns more effectively.

While there’s evidence that later start times have benefits, the problem remains in how to implement them without disrupting after school activities. Now that we’ve had some experience with online learning, perhaps we could include that possibility in the discussion to help find the most beneficial solution for our students.



**HyunJu Kwak**

As a mom, I believe that schools should take an active role in educating students about harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) behaviors. Ridgewood schools' HIB policy can and should be broader than the state mandated definition that relies on race, religion or some definable characteristic. When a student is under attack, whether online or in-person, verbally or physically, for whatever reason, it should be thoroughly investigated by the school administration. Students and families should feel safe knowing that all HIB incidents will be effectively addressed. ***[continued on next page]***



**HyunJu Kwak**

**[Continued]** Student wellness should incorporate actionable steps to increase awareness of the dangers of vaping, drug and alcohol abuse. The Board should build on the student-led initiative to install vaping monitors at the high school.

Later start times is an intriguing potential solution to alleviating adolescent chronic sleep deprivation. However, the challenges are significant, including the impact on working families, the difficulty of coordinating extracurricular activities when other neighboring districts are on different schedules, and increased transportation costs. I believe further examination of school districts that actually implemented a later start time is essential. For example, the real-life outcomes from Princeton and other school districts that switched will be invaluable if Ridgewood considers implementing the same policy.



**Michael W. Lembo**

Student wellness is extremely important. We have to make sure our students' mental health is as strong as their physical health. There has been an increase in anxiety, social, and emotional issues in our students. We have seen some new programs, such as the elementary school guidance counselors that were implemented partially last year, that are showing great progress. I would love to explore more ideas that promote student wellness.

Along with principals and wellness teachers in our district, I implemented cyber safety courses for our students. Cyber safety is such an important concern, in terms of our students' emotional wellness and self-image. These are very important topics to me and address many concerns such as bullying, suicide, and online safety.

As for a later start time, I would have to agree with Dr. Gorman and Keith Cook's presentation. when they stated that sleep is very important to our students. However, the scheduling of school activities is a real obstacle. If the school day runs later, other activities are affected. There is no simple solution, but the dialog must continue until we find the right one.





**Muhammad  
Mahmoud**

Physical, mental, and social well-being are the most important aspects of long-term health, happiness, and satisfaction. I strongly believe that our schools should be actively focusing on this—and the current wellness series is a great example—but there is always more to be done. We should explore hiring a district-wide social and mental health coordinator who will focus on this aspect for all of our children. HIB policies need to be enforced and strengthened so that harassment, bullying, and intimidation never occur. Our most important mission is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for our students to truly excel in schools and lead fulfilling future lives. As for school start times, more and more research confirms that later start times for high school students is beneficial. We need to actively explore this as a district and take immediate action based on input from the experts.



**Dan Creed**

As I said earlier, I have great confidence in our school system's executive team. We must let the administrators and teachers practice their craft.

Bullying and intimidation have no place in our schools and I will do everything possible to support forward looking policies and initiatives.

Regarding a possible change to our start times, I think we should take a very thorough look at the data available. As a parent who has seen three teenagers struggle with getting up in the morning, I think there may be something to be gained. With that said, we need to involve the science, the students, the parents, and the teachers to see what can be done. It is a complicated issue that will impact every family differently, hence we must be diligent and thorough in trying to figure out if a better solution exists.