

League of Women Voters of Teaneck Voters' Guide Board of Education 2024

Our VOTERS GUIDE questionnaire and letter of invitation to the Candidates' Forum was mailed and emailed to each of the candidates for Teaneck Board of Education on August 20th. 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. Discuss your familiarity with the curriculum being taught at various grade levels in our school district. Please give 1-2 specific examples of what you think about specific subjects.**
- 2. The Town Council recently cut its portion of the FORUM's budget. What is your understanding of the services that the FORUM provides for Teaneck's youth and how would you recommend restoring this essential support program?**
- 3. What specific suggestions do you have for improvement of school/community relations (perception of those who don't have children in Teaneck's schools, constructive concerns of public school families, positive experiences of students & parents about the quality of public education in Teaneck, etc.)?**

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

Nadia Hosein, Linden Ave

Years residing in Teaneck: 11 years

Occupation: Biology teacher in Wayne, NJ

Education: Bachelors in Science from City University of NY

Masters in Molecular Biology from New York University

Family: Mother of three children: Nuri (22), Esa (18), Samiya (15)

Community Involvement:

- * Former member, Teaneck Board of Education
- * Active member of the Darul Islah mosque
- * Girl Scout troop leader
- * Pioneer of TPS' Community Picnic, June 2024
- * PTO member
- * *One Town, One Vote* volunteer

1. Over the years, my most significant source of insight into our educational offerings has been my own children's academic journeys. As a mother, I have become intimately aware of the K-12 curriculum, online learning platforms, and quality of instruction offered by the public school.

I deeply appreciate and respect the quality of education and dedication our staff have wholeheartedly committed to my children, and all of Teaneck's children. Additionally, our district offers a wide range of support programs that cater not only to the academic needs but also to the emotional well-being of our students.

As we face a nationwide decline in math scores, I believe it is crucial for our district to place a stronger emphasis on enhancing math proficiency. Math is deeply integrated into every scientific discipline and plays a vital role in developing students' critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and analytical skills, which extend far beyond the subject itself.

Another area where I see potential for growth is in our business education. Our students are entering a world shaped by cryptocurrency, artificial intelligence, investing, and other emerging fields. It is essential that they are exposed to the foundational concepts of these subjects so that, upon graduation, they feel confident and prepared to use these tools, regardless of the career path they choose.

2. The FORUM is a pillar in our community, offering invaluable support to both students and residents. Many, including my own children, have benefited greatly, with my kids even securing their first jobs through the FORUM. It provides a wide range of essential services, including school-based counseling programs, employment opportunities, academic enrichment, mentorship, recreational activities, and a unique non-traditional Girl Scout Troop—Studio 2B.

The recent budget cuts will have a significant impact on these vital programs. It is truly disheartening that despite the town generating approximately \$2.9 million from the sale of a cell tower, the council chose not to allocate even 1% of that to the FORUM. To help restore some of the funding, I recommend applying for targeted government and non-government grants that address the specific focus of the FORUM. Additionally, encouraging private citizens to contribute could help mitigate the shortfall and sustain these critical services.

3. I appreciate this question, since unfortunately many times perception drives reality, as opposed to- reality driving perception. While serving on the Board of Education, I emphasized the importance of communication with parents, in multiple formats- via phone calls, emails, texts, social media, even the use of the newspapers to communicate with parents. This is also why we pioneered the community picnic, to help foster these positive relationships. All stakeholders- parents, students, administrators and ALL Teaneck community members should come and meet and engage in a productive and meaningful manner. It is only when there is open dialogue can we change those wrong perceptions, address any constructive concerns, and ultimately produce a school district that is prepared to successfully educate generations of Teaneck students.

Seleene R. Wong, North Street

Years residing in Teaneck: 9 years

Occupation: Early Childhood Education Specialist

Education: Bachelor of Arts in Literature, Ramapo College of New Jersey;
MS, Early Childhood Education, and Special Education, Touro College;

MS, Administration and Leadership, Saint Peter's University

Family: Mother to 3 children (THS graduate '24, 10th grader, 8th grader)

Community Involvement:

- Founder of Free Reads Educational Mentoring Program
- Co-Founder and Chair of the Juneteenth Committee of Teaneck
- BFMS PTA Executive Board
- Member of the MLK Birthday Committee
- Mayor Appointed - Library Trustee
- *Leadership Teaneck* graduate, June 2024

1. As a parent, I am familiar with the literacy curriculum for middle and high school students, and I am very impressed with the selection assigned to them. The selections are not only inclusive, reflecting a wide range of voices and perspectives, but also relevant to the experiences and interests of today's youth. The book choices, such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, are powerful selections that provide rich, meaningful narratives tackling important themes like racism, justice, identity, and resilience. While some topics in these texts may be difficult to comprehend, the guided instruction offered by teachers ensures that students are supported in engaging with these complex ideas. These books encourage critical thinking, allowing students to explore challenging themes through discussion and analysis. Additionally, teachers allowing students to select their books for independent reading studies have further enhanced their eagerness to read, creating an open space for diverse readings that reflect a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

2. The FORUM has built a strong reputation as a valuable resource for our youth and families, serving as one of the pillars of our community for many years. Its programs have played an essential role, making a direct and positive impact on our youth. Over 30 years ago, as a student at Teaneck High School, I frequently visited the FORUM, particularly participating in their Peer Mediation program. It was there that I developed important conflict resolution and communication skills. Years later, my own son had a similarly impactful experience as a freshman when he attended a week-long summer program for incoming students. This program provided guidance and mentorship as they transitioned into a new chapter of their lives. The FORUM's initiatives have consistently fostered community engagement, creating experiences that truly last a lifetime.

3. The three suggestions I have for improving school/ community relations are to encourage greater parent involvement in schools, for the school district to build transparency between the school district and parents, and to encourage families to participate in community events outside of school. When parents are actively involved, they better understand the school/ district and build stronger relationships with the school community. For me, joining the PTA was how I began my involvement in the school and our community. The PTA fosters collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators, all working together for the benefit of students.

Transparency from the district, offers valuable insight into the school's structure, planning, and future direction. This helps to build trust and a more cohesive community. It also provides parents with an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the Board of Education

and school administration. Parents should understand that these roles are crucial in shaping children's educational experience.

Jennifer Levy, 540 Standish Road

Years residing in Teaneck: 24 years

Occupation: Lawyer, Educator

Education: Stern College, BA in American Studies and Medieval Jewish History; Teachers College, Columbia University, MA in Gifted Education; Fordham University School of Law, JD; Seton Hall University, MA in Education Leadership K-12; Certifications and Professional Licenses in Elementary School Teacher K-5, Social Studies Teacher K-12, Supervisor, Principal, and Licensed NJ Attorney.

Family: Husband, Jacob (attorney); 3 kids – Kaitlin (16), Frisch School; Jacob (12), Chapel Hill School (previously attended Lowell and BFMS); Claire (9), Yeshivat Noam

Community Involvement:

- Member of the NJ Association for Justice
- Significant Pro-Bono work for children and families
- Former Founding Board Member of Yeshivat He'Atid
- Former Parent Association President
- Former Member of the Bergen County Principals & Supervisors Association
- Former Member of the NJEA

1. As a former literacy teacher, I value Teaneck's use of *Benchmark Literacy* and Wilson's *Foundations* to build foundational literacy skills. It is great that *Benchmark Literacy* offers a well-rounded approach; however, there aren't enough nonfiction resources included, which are crucial for developing informational reading skills. Furthermore, some students need more work on phonics, especially those approaching grade level. As someone who has used *Foundations* and has been trained in *Wilson Reading*, I would recommend the District use the complementary Wilson program, *Just Words*, to provide for this. The recent elimination of positions for supplemental support has created a gap for students needing intensive intervention.

Although teachers are being trained in Orton-Gillingham (a program I have also been trained in), a rigorous phonics program originally designed for children with language-based learning disabilities, it is unclear how this training is being implemented in the classroom. Moreover, our District needs a new writing curriculum to replace the outdated, whole-language-based Calkins curriculum. This new curriculum should include more scaffolding, graphic organizers, differentiation, and explicit grammar instruction to support diverse learners effectively.

In math, *Eureka Math 2* encourages consistency and depth, focusing on conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and problem-solving skills. However, it is written on a higher reading level than many of our students can read, particularly those struggling with informational reading. Teacher training and support, along with differentiated instruction, are key to ensuring all students can access the material effectively.

2. The FORUM program provides services to Teaneck’s youth, including counseling, social-emotional support, leadership development, and enrichment activities. It offers a safe environment for students to build skills and resilience. While most of the program’s budget is funded by grant monies, the remaining money needed to run the program could and should be covered by the BOE budget. The 2024-25 BOE budget is \$127.9M. Opportunities exist to reallocate \$25k to the FORUM.

3. Improving community relations requires greater transparency, better communication, and stronger collaboration. Many feel caught off guard by decisions made without input from parents, teachers, supervisors, or even principals, and internal conflicts detract from our core mission—supporting our children.

To address this, we must enhance transparency by making decision-making processes open and accessible, including more public forums and detailed updates. We also need proactive communication that engages all stakeholders early, especially on significant decisions. Establishing parent and teacher advisory groups and improving communication channels will build trust and ensure all voices are heard. Finally, prioritizing collaboration over personal conflicts will help us focus on students’ needs, build public trust and highlight positive experiences. Commitment to transparency, communication, and unity will better serve Teaneck’s children and ensure everyone feels involved and valued.

Jonathan Rodriguez, 1140 Congress Street

Years residing in Teaneck: 25 years (cumulative)

Occupation: Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown. I teach acting and musical theater to neurotypical and neurodiverse students aged 3-35

Education: Teaneck High graduate (2001); BFA Musical Theater University of the Arts

Family: Wife, Andrea and we have two kiddos- Cali and Skyler. My parents also still live in Teaneck.

Community Involvement:

- Jon Harms Performing Arts Company (performing in nursing homes, fundraisers, hospitals, community events, etc.)
- 3 years, Teaneck BOE Trustee
 - Member of Personnel, Negotiations, Curriculum & Special Ed committees

1. I am on the BOE curriculum committee so I’m as familiar as any board member can be. Our focus as a committee has been to set high, yet attainable goals for our students in terms

of overall competency in the core subjects.

We are also pushing to try and expand and set higher standards for our world languages programs, which up until now have generally not yielded proficiency in whatever that language has been

I would also like to see our arts curriculum updated specifically with more opportunities for students to share their work.

2. The FORUM provides much needed mental health services, academic support, and recreation “free of charge” to all teenaged students in Teaneck attending both private and public schools.

While Dr Spencer has promised to protect the program, we need to either elect leaders to council that will re-fund the program, and/or (preferably AND) elect school board members who will prioritize funding this essential program. I would 100% vote yes to a proposal from the administration to protect the FORUM

3. I think we’ve done quite a bit to prioritize improving our community relations, but changing opinions and perceptions takes time. One suggestion I’ve made is to improve and standardize our social media campaigns and I think that has been helping. Through social media, we can reach more of our residents to make sure that they are aware of and involved in Teaneck Schools community events like this year’s *Family Picnic* in June at Votee Park. This gives families the opportunity to connect with their neighbors and hopefully start to bridge the divides.

We also need louder voices from the community who utilizes the public schools as many of the detractors do not.

Kevin Gibbs, 56 Circle Driveway

Years residing in Teaneck: 25 years

Occupation: Law Enforcement Officer; Police Officer

Education: Bachelors of Science - Sports Health / Pre-Athletic Training (University of Delaware); Masters - Cyber/Homeland Security Administration - Terrorism and Security Studies (Fairleigh Dickinson University)

Family: K. Gibbs (Mother) - THS Class of '88;
K. Gibbs (Father)
K. Gibbs (Sister) - THS Class of '14

Community Involvement:

- Teaneck HS Boys’ JV Head Basketball Coach/Varsity Assistant Coach
- Teaneck HS Boy’s Football Academic Advisor
- Emergency Medical Technician, Teaneck Volunteer Ambulance Corps (TVAC)

1. Parents and kids are not happy with the transition to theory-based education because they believe that pupils are not being appropriately challenged in reading, writing, and mathematics. Students who receive few assignments miss out on opportunities to practice key concepts and

acquire vital abilities. A well-rounded strategy that combines theory with practical, demanding assignments that challenge pupils intellectually is required to address this. Regular practice in essential topics can help consolidate knowledge and boost student and parent confidence.

2. The Forum's mission is to provide comprehensive, easily available services that foster positive emotional, physical, social, and academic development of Teaneck's residents aged 13-19. Since adolescence is a formative time that impacts lifelong results, it is imperative to design a center that fosters positive emotional, physical, social, and academic development for residents aged 13-19. Young people are more prone to stress, anxiety, and poor decision-making during these years because they are dealing with major obstacles in their academic, social, and personal lives. A center that offers all-inclusive, conveniently located services offers a secure setting where individuals may seek advice and assistance, encouraging the growth of their bodies.

Physical health services promote fitness and deter unhealthy behaviors, while emotional well-being is crucial for building resilience and coping strategies. Teens' social development lowers their risk of isolation or negative behaviors by fostering strong relationships and a sense of belonging through peer participation and mentoring. Academic help raises educational attainment and gives teenagers the confidence and skills they need to succeed in the future.

The provision of a comprehensive developmental approach by such a facility guarantees the ability of teenagers to mature into mature, responsible individuals. It fills up the gaps in the services that young people need to thrive, especially those from underprivileged communities. In the end, funding youth development builds communities and individuals, promoting long-term social well-being.

There are numerous strategies to bring back the FORUM, which was eliminated because of financial constraints. A few of those concepts might be evaluating the FORUM's worth, determining community needs, interacting with program participants and alumni, exploring alternate financing sources, and reviewing the program's functionalities.

3. Building trust and highlighting the benefits of public education are crucial to closing the achievement gap between families who choose not to send their children to public schools and those who do. Start by fostering open communication between the community and schools by holding town halls, forums, and school visits that highlight the benefits of public education. Emphasize student accomplishments, success stories, and the variety of programs—including vocational education—that cater to a range of requirements.

Enhance professional routes and vocational training in partnership with neighborhood businesses and groups, highlighting the concrete advantages for students' future success. Promote collaborations with business titans and apprenticeship programs that link learning to practical skills to increase enrollment in public schools.

Involve parents in volunteer work and workshops so they feel appreciated and heard. Perceptions can change by active community involvement and the promotion of actual public-school triumphs.

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.

For information on all candidates, poll locations & registration information, go to www.VOTE411.org