League of Women Voters of Teaneck
Voters' Guide
Board of Education 2026

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 July 29th. 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. **The search for a new superintendent is clearly one of the main issues presently on the Board's agenda. What suggestions do you have for approaching this important decision?**
2. **Given the budgetary constraints under which the district operates, what areas would you focus on to achieve cost savings without adversely impacting instructional goals and mandated programs?**
3. **(a) What is one decision you think our Board has gotten wrong in the past few years? (b) What is one correct decision you think our Board has made?**

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

Gerald Kirshenbaum, 316 West Englewood Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: 11 years
Occupation: Retired Educator -53 years leading schools and districts PreK- graduate schools; Graduate Adjunct professor in Doctoral program
Education: Public school education K-12; B.S. from the University of Florida
Family: Four children, 21 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren
Community Involvement:

- Vice President, Teaneck Board of Education
- Co-Chair, BOE Superintendent Search Committee
- BOE Interim Superintendent Search Committee
- Member, BOE Policy Committee
- Member, BOE Special Education Committee
- Member, BOE Government Outreach Committee
- Chaired private school board 10+ years
- Met with State Senator Johnson re: TPS health insurance

1. The search for a new superintendent is one of the most important tasks the BOE faces. The new superintendent must demonstrate that he/she is a strong educator with knowledge of the preK-12 curriculum and has the ability to relate to a diverse population. The candidate must demonstrate a strong commitment to strengthen the academic growth of challenged-advanced students as well

as ensuring that all students advance in their individual talents, Students must be academically "stretched" and provided with a diverse cluster of opportunities for growth and preparation for life beyond secondary education. This cannot be achieved without dynamic leadership. The superintendent must have strong interpersonal skills and be comfortable relating to a variety of personalities so that the vision and direction for the district pervades his/her actions and helps to develop the leadership skills of the administrative team.

2. The three areas in our budget that have runaway costs are: health insurance, transportation and special education. We are examining restructuring our health insurance offerings for staff. To this end, we are working closely with our unions to address these runaway costs so that we avoid professional layoffs. The most important variable in the educational process is the ratio and relationship of teachers to students as well as providing for the diverse needs of our student body. Grant writing for governmental offerings as well as reaching out to private corporations are important paths to pursue. We also need to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of our present programs and make adjustments where needed.

3. (a) The Board has not always selected a strong educator to lead the district. This has curtailed student growth and at times limited introducing effective academic programs that properly address the needs of our diverse population.

(b) Over the past three years the district set academic goals for students in ELA, mathematics, science and world languages. The training of primary teachers in Orton Gillingham techniques and the introducing of a new math program are good examples of our push towards educational excellence. This vision is essential for the growth of our student population. The Curriculum Committee continues to evaluate student data and to encourage discussions. Our examination of the weak Algebra I scores illustrates our need to provide for challenging students and to strengthen the foundation for all Algebra I students. This will ensure their success in secondary mathematics courses.

David Gruber, 4 Myron Court

Years residing in Teaneck: 34 years
Occupation: Retired
Education: Mt. Sinai School of Medicine 1983, Columbia Business School 1986
Family: Four children – Ben (36), Alison (33), Jesse (33) & Max (29). Three grandchildren
Community Involvement:

- Board Of Education trustee: 2013-2018, 2023-26.
- Chair of BOE Finance & Facilities committee
- Board member (former), Congregation Netivot Shalom

1. The search for a new superintendent begins with an interim replacement, Ms. Angela Davis who is highly skilled and knowledgeable of the Teaneck school system. Much has been learned from the tenures of Christopher Irving and Andre Spencer that should be applied to the search criteria. This includes the need for experience at multiple levels, a savant leadership style

and good communication skills. Profile development based on selection criteria is required and include cultural competency and community engagement, academic equity and instructional leadership, operational and financial competency and statutory and governance requirements.

2. The classroom is protected. The achievement of instructional goals remain paramount. As Chair of the Finance and Facilities Committee, the BOE has been dealing with this issue for the past 2-3 years. Taxes had risen 2.5% in 2025-26 and 2.99% in 2026-27, reflecting rising costs in three areas: Healthcare, transportation and special education. Salary agreements have been reached with the TTEA (teachers), TAAS (administrators) and Teamsters (maintenance) below the NJ average.

The single largest issue facing Teaneck is health insurance. Teaneck, under my guidance and recommendation left the state health plan (NJSHP) two years ago; the rise in our insurance costs, 17%, is far below that of the NJSHP, 30%. Next year looks even worse, as the state health plan is forecast to rise by 34%

I have worked in healthcare for 40+ years and thus, am leading efforts to reduce the rate of growth. This may include changes to medical and pharmaceutical benefit design, a reduction in the use of out-of-network utilization and the use of reference pricing. Changes are subject to negotiation. Constraints exist.

Potential opportunities also exist in administrative simplification such as the sharing of special education transportation costs and reducing the number of out-of-district placements by offering comparable services.

3. (a) Covid school closure. Teaneck schools were closed from March 2020 until hybrid (April 2021) and classroom learning (September 2021) were instituted despite the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines issued ten months earlier, in June 2020 recommending school openings. A correlation exists between the duration of school closure and academic performance of learning opportunities were lost.

(b) Hiring Angela Davis as the interim superintendent. Angela has worked in the Teaneck school system for over twenty years. She has been an assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent of administrative services. She was also President of TAAS, the union representing administrators – an area of contention with Dr. Spencer. Angela is engaged and well-known within the Teaneck community.

Marcelo Venegas MD, 659 Glenwood Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: 13 years
Occupation: Medical Doctor (internal medicine)
Education: University of Illinois in Champaign, Illinois: Bachelor's degree in Biophysics and Physiology. University of Illinois in Chicago: Medical Degree
Montefiore Medical Center, Bronx NY: Internal Medicine and Social Medicine.
Family: Ex-Wife Diana Varagus MD; Three Daughters – Amira, Isabela & Gabriela

Community Involvement:

- PTO Parent at Bergen Day School
- Teaneck 5K Run/Walk/Roll for Education and 1M Color Fun Run May 2022 and 2023
- Volunteer at Never Alone Again Resource Center
- Business owner: KnowNOW Health at 569 Cedar Lane, Teaneck

1.. The search for a new Teaneck superintendent must be structured, transparent, and community driven. We should choose the best educational and organizational leader - not simply the candidate with the strongest résumé. Candidates should demonstrate:

- Proven academic leadership and measurable student outcomes
- Strong financial and budget-management skills
- Special education expertise
- College and career-readiness experience
- Facilities and capital-project knowledge
- Excellent communication with parents and the community
- A commitment to accountability and measurable results
- The ability to unite Teaneck's diverse community

The superintendent must understand our students' needs while responsibly overseeing a $130 million budget. Fiscal management should be a primary annual performance goal. I would engage parents, educators, students, and residents through town halls and surveys. Finalists should present 100-day plans and align their goals with Teaneck's five-year strategic plan. Contracts should include measurable annual objectives and public evaluations of progress. Above all, decisions must put students first—not politics. Teaneck deserves a superintendent who leads collaboratively, manages resources responsibly, and delivers results for every child.

2. Given the district's budget constraints, I would pursue a $2 million efficiency initiative without raising taxes or more importantly reducing classroom instruction. Priorities:

- Administration: Conduct a zero-based review to identify overlapping responsibilities, consolidate positions through attrition, reduce unnecessary consultants, centralize purchasing and ensure every position supports student outcomes.
- Operations and energy: A 5% efficacy improvement in the $10.77 million operations budget could save approximately $539,000.
- Transportation: Review routes, capacity, contracts, and competitive bidding. A 5% reduction in the $9.655 million budget could save approximately $483,000 while protecting legally required services.
- Vendors and consultants: Review contracts and require measurable results and competitive pricing.
- Legal expenses: Investigate rising per-pupil costs and reduce avoidable spending without compromising necessary legal protection.

The goal is responsible management through efficiency, consolidation, and stronger oversight—not classroom layoffs or program cuts. Protecting instruction and student services must remain our first priority.

3. (a) One incorrect decision was failing to build a unified Board and community vision around

A long-term capital improvement plan and bond referendum. Teaneck missed an important opportunity to pursue a $30–$50 million capital project, including air conditioning throughout our schools. It is unacceptable that students and staff must endure excessive heat or half-day schedules, especially as climate change makes extreme temperatures more frequent.

A bond referendum is a public vote authorizing the district to borrow money for major capital projects, with repayment spread over approximately 20 years. Teaneck's last referendum was 25 years ago. A comprehensive plan could provide safer, modernized learning environments; improved climate control; facilities supporting academics, athletics, and extracurricular activities; and a long-term investment in student success. It could also protect property values and keep Teaneck competitive with neighboring districts.

(b) One correct decision was the commitment to strengthening Pre-K and kindergarten. Projected Pre-K enrollment increased from 327 to 360 students, while inclusion enrollment rose from 25 to 48. Teaneck's free, full-day Pre-K uses the Tools of the Mind curriculum and addresses academic, language, social-emotional, and developmental needs early—while leveraging state funding.

Liza Fernandez, 1658 Teaneck Road

Years residing in Teaneck: 35 years
Occupation: 1st Grade Teacher, Bergen County Christian Academy, Hackensack
Education: Bachelor's in English Literature, Master's in Elementary Education
Family: Married for 19 years to George Fernandez, Jr; three sons, George IV (17), Gabriel (13) & Gael (9).
Community Involvement:

*.Teaneck Community Charter School Organization
- Chair (2023-2024, 2024-2025, 2025-2026)
- Two terms as secretary (2021 - 2022, 2022-2023)

* Substitute Teacher with ESS (2022-2025) - Benjamin Franklin MS & Teaneck Community Charter School
* Teaneck Road Business Community Alliance - Seven Years, Secretary to President
* Teaneck Christmas Tree Lighting - 2024 & 2025
*."Teaneck Night of Worship" - (2023) a free night of worship in the park.
* The Well Purified Water (arranged donations of water to churches & Teaneck sports organizations)

1. In regard to finding the right superintendent for such a time as this, this decision cannot be taken lightly or rushed. My first suggestion is that we clearly identify the qualities we are looking for, because without clear criteria, we may not recognize the right candidate when we find them. The candidate should have a proven track record of dedication to students and families. They do not have to be from Teaneck, but they must be passionate about bringing meaningful change to TPS, with a forward-thinking vision and a strategic approach to empowering future generations. Most importantly, they must be someone parents and community members can respect and trust through transparent decision making and cultural responsibility.

2. No district wants to cut programs or let personnel go. Unfortunately, rising costs, high interest rates, and debt have forced many communities to make difficult decisions. While the Board manages income and expenses, we must remember that our decisions impact families, personnel, and most importantly, our students. As a first-grade teacher, I know that taking the quick route can have long term consequences. Being dedicated, fair, and equitable means pausing to examine alternatives before making cuts. I would look for ways to reconfigure the current budget, reduce unnecessary debt, protect instructional programs, and protect mandated services.

3. (a) No school board is perfect. However, one area where I believe the Teaneck Board of Education has fallen short is keeping instructional materials current. It is difficult to say we are preparing students for tomorrow when some textbooks and resources date back to the 1990s. In addition, there are concerns among some residents about whether the district is fully meeting its obligations under the Amistad legislation. Our students deserve instructional materials that are current, engaging, culturally responsible, and aligned with the education and skills they need for tomorrow's world. If we expect our students to be empowered for the future, we must give them the tools to get there.

(b) One thing I believe they got right was the Associate Degree program with Bergen Community College. It gives students an opportunity to step outside the four walls of their everyday "Castle on the Hill" experience and onto a college campus early, providing a hands-on exposure to college life. I have seen the impact personally. It motivated my own high schooler to take another look at college after a period when he was considering not even attending college. I believe programs like this give students exposure to different possibilities, help them discover what is right for them, and allow them to see a future they may not have considered before.

Eric Rhea, 275 Van Buren Avenue

Years residing in Teaneck: 5 years
Occupation: Business Owner and Founder - *Furnish My Space* (Interior Design)
Education: BS in Political Science Howard University; Interior Design Certification, NY Institute of Art and Design
Family: Wife Madalina Sucala; daughter Evelyn Rhea
Community Involvement:

- Board member and program volunteer at *Hoods to Woods Foundation*
- Employment program provider for New York City Housing Authority
- Volunteering at Bergen Day School, Teaneck
- NYCHA Hurricane Sandy disaster - displaced housing renovation program
- Never Alone Again - Teaneck - Volunteer

1. Finding a superintendent with a proven track record of fiscal responsibility while working with both teachers and school administrators productively should be the board's key focus. While experience also brings along past relationships, the hiring of key staff and administrators should

come from “best intentions” without nepotism. Resume selections to present to the board after the past five years' turnover of multiple superintendents requires a deeper dive into those qualifications, person’s desire to stay in the district and do the hard work in the face of adversity against residents who may not support the interest of TPS students if they don’t have children in the schools.

2. Recent changes in the reversal of what the Civil Rights Act stood for to now benefit the MORE fortunate and take away what it why put in place; for minorities to have a fair and equal chance, make it necessary to ensure TPS have every resource they can to enhance educational value. Trump Administration’s IRS ruling now intends to take away the tax exempt status of any K-12 or college institution offering any scholarship or mention of race consciousness in schooling. This should affect Black, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern and Yeshiva school kids. It makes it imperative that we find ways to shift funding where able from other areas to the curriculum and environment, and find outside grant and bond options to acquire more money.

3. (a) Not voting in support of a bond referendum proposed for necessary capital improvements and air conditioning in Teaneck schools. Without quality education and facilities we fall behind as a district and nation. Betterment of our future generations through education is the only thing that will keep us ahead globally when we are clearly falling behind others. The numbers shown for repaying the previously proposed $50 Million bond referendum were estimated around $16/month/household. This equates to 50 cents per day; less than what Sally Struthers said a cup of coffee was in the 1980s when asking for donations for abused animals.

Lack of air conditioning in the schools at a time when climate change is making longer and hotter seasons only leads to a problem that won’t go away but will become progressively more expensive to fix over time. Children missing school days in the beginning and end of school years decreases their learning opportunity and causes huge burdens on working parents who don’t have the luxury of at home nannies and sitters, forcing them to abruptly stay home from work or struggle to find a means of daytime childcare.

(b) Took advantage of state funded Preschool Education Aid and Mixed-Delivery Model. In the 2024/25 school year, my daughter Evelyn was turning 3 in late December 2024 and we had to enroll her in pre-k at the French American Academy in Englewood for $26,000+ for the school year. Despite the savings from having her in pre-k at Bergen Day, it was equally important to have her with a diverse group of children in her own neighborhood and town. If a child grows up in Teaneck, I would like to think they can thrive in Teaneck and contribute to it.

ELECTION DAY
Tuesday, November 3rd
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