

SUBMITTED TO THE JOURNAL NEWS AS A COMMUNITY VIEW ARTICLE:

While there is currently an intense focus on school district budgets, the election of school board members deserves equal or greater attention. Local school boards make the governance decisions that affect how our children are educated and how our tax dollars are spent. Boards of education will face ever more challenging issues in the years to come, and the districts with solid leadership teams will be best prepared to navigate through rough waters. This year, 71% of the districts in Westchester and Putnam counties have contested elections for school board seats. So, how can the voter assess who is truly the right person for the board, particularly among first time candidates?

Today's board member must find satisfaction in working collegially to confront tough challenges. While many candidates promise to take on the system to bring change, studies have shown that successful school districts are led by cohesive boards of education, with a strong working relationship among management and staff based on mutual respect and trust, good communication and an underlying focus on educational outcomes. Effective board members are thoughtful consensus builders who don't focus on their own personal agendas, but rather on what is best for all children. They know how to listen and sift through an array of data and opinions in order to make informed decisions, understanding that board decisions will not always be easy or popular.

Public education is at a crossroads. School districts must come to grips with shrinking resources, long-standing union contracts, and federal and state mandates, while being ever mindful of the needs of the local taxpayer and the student in the classroom. We need to elect board of education members who are able to maintain a clear and consistent focus on strategic goals and priorities. Now, more than ever, an effective school governance team is critical to the long-term success of every district.

Board of education members have the power to lead a district to great success or to lead it astray. Choose wisely when you cast your vote on May 18.

Lois Winkler, President
Lisa Davis, Executive Director
Westchester-Putnam School Boards Association
May 12, 2010