



George Simpson

- 1. Please provide 3 words that capture your candidacy.

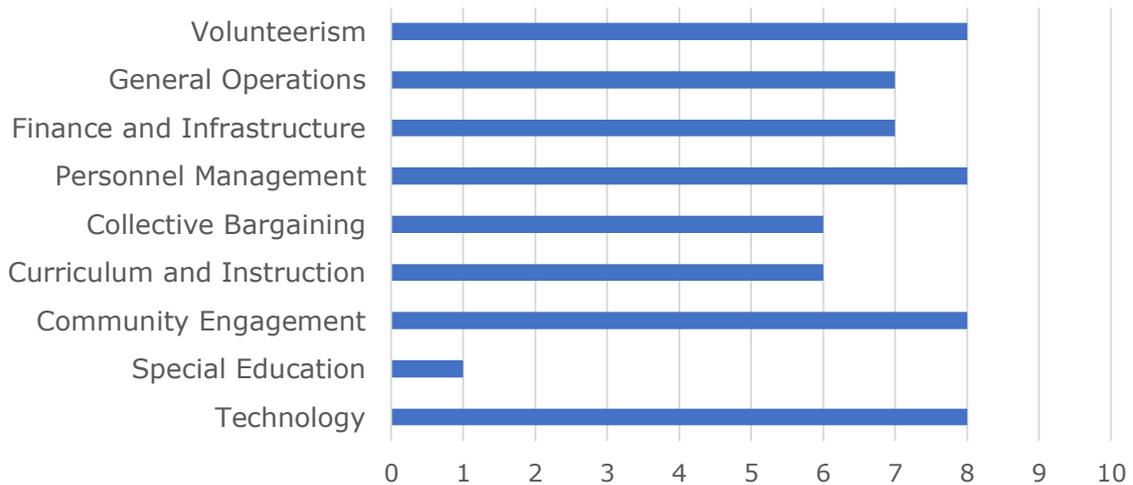
Fearless community service.

- 2. Why are you running for the BOE? Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve on the Board of Education.

I believe democracy is at its best when engaged, well-informed citizens help solve the challenges we face. And we do ourselves a disservice when we rely solely on others to decide what's best for us. So my motivation stems from that belief as well as my frustration at an appointed board that worked harder to find excuses than answers. I've spent my career solving complex business problems with unexpected, original and creative ideas. I believe strongly in the power of asking "What if...." What if we tried a new approach? Or what if we thought about the problem differently? Unfortunately, we've become risk averse when it comes to education or government, with new ideas often discounted because they're untried and unproven. But it should be obvious that if we continue to face the same old problems, then the same old solutions clearly aren't working. We need to move past the expected, to be smarter and do better. Let's face our challenges, and let's solve them together.

- 3. Please rate your work/life experience in:

George Simpson's Self-Rating



Note: Scale of 1 (least experience) to 10 (most experience)

Please feel free to elaborate on any of the above self-rating.

My expertise is not in education. My experience lies in solving business problems. But a lack of knowledge in an industry was never a hindrance in my career. If anything, it was an advantage. Why? People who've only ever worked in the automotive industry, for instance, have only ever been exposed to business solutions within the automotive



industry. But as a creative director who worked across everything from financial services to consumer packaged goods, I could quickly assess a business need and offer ideas that borrowed from countless other industries. In short, my career freed me from the dreaded curse of "this is how we do things" mindset and allowed me to propose fresh and innovative ideas.

4. In what school district or community activities/organizations have you been involved?

I am currently an assistant den leader for Montclair's "mighty" Pack 12 cub scout troop. I've also done baking for Bradford school fundraisers.

5. If elected, what are your top 2-3 priorities for the BOE? Specifically, what do you think the BOE should prioritize in the next year and what should be prioritized in a longer-term plan?

There are a number of priorities I'd like to see addressed. The first has to be the HVAC bond initiative. It is unconscionable that teachers and children have been left to sit in classrooms with the windows open for nearly two years. That referendum must be put in front of the voters as soon as possible, but it must first be communicated clearly to town residents. We can't just put it on the ballot and hope for the best. We have to find ways to make the need clear and make sure it passes. Second, we need to address the physical state of school buildings so no one is ever put in harm's way again. My other priorities would shake up how the board functions by making it more responsive, accessible and transparent. So my third priority would be a proposal for the board to visit every school to discuss needs and goals at the beginning of each school year and again at the end to assess whether those needs and goals were met. Not to criticize, but to solve challenges together. Fourth, I'd propose that the board spend its time on the needs of kids, parents and teachers. For instance, at present, board members tend to make little speeches before board meetings in response to outside events like an election or prominent retirement. But if every member makes just a 3 minute comment, they're using up nearly 30 minutes that could be far better spent addressing the needs of the schools. I'd end the speechifying and have the board instead issue official statements to be posted online or published by local media. Finally, the BOE needs to be transparent, starting with using its facebook page to communicate with the voters, parents, and teachers. As it is, the page has not been updated since 2019.

6. In your opinion, what would be an "ideal/well" functioning BOE? How can the BOE be more accessible and more communicative with the community?

Having a board made up of 9 residents who are friends and neighbors, as well as parents of students in Montclair schools will solve much of the problems we now face. That direct connection will remind BOE members that they're not "leaders" but representatives of the children, teachers, administrators and parents in Montclair. The BOE can be more accessible by being more transparent and getting out into the community. There are a wide range of ideas we could try, but for starters, the BOE should visit schools, talk to teachers, put its facebook page to better use, and hold parent-only or teacher-only meetings so people feel uninhibited to express their concerns. Most of all, the BOE should also be flexible enough to try new approaches that might be suggested in the future.



7. Recognizing that relationships are a foundation of our school community, what specific steps would you take to improve the relationships between the BOE and the district administrators, the various unions, and parents/caregivers?

Better relationships start with better communication. The BOE members have to recognize that they are not leaders, but rather representatives of everyone in the district, from administrators and educators to parents and unions. I've long believed that the BOE should visit individual schools at the beginning and end of every school year in order to discuss the challenges ahead in September and assess the results in June. The BOE should be equally accessible to unions and parents, setting up dedicated time for each constituency to present the specific challenges each one faces. That way, teachers can feel free to discuss issues they may not want to discuss in front of parents, or administrators can bring up sensitive issues they might not want to discuss in public.

8. What should MPSD do differently? Please be specific – academic programs, sports, civic programs, extra curriculars, etc.

While Montclair is an affluent town, not everyone who lives here is affluent. So I believe we should redirect money in the town budget to invest in hope for the future rather than fear of the present. Specifically, we should spend more on services to benefit students. We should extend library hours, programs, resources, and services to give kids more places to study and learn. And no child should be turned away from a school or rec league if their parents can't afford the fees or equipment. Let's apply needs-based financial aid so that every child who wants to play on a team can play. We should also offer after-school tutoring free of charge to students at risk of falling behind academically. We could even offer help in filling out college applications to students who might be the first in their families to go to college. The bottom line is that we're all here to make sure our kids get the best possible education, whether a family who've lived in Montclair for generations or folks who just moved here. Let's make sure every child gets that chance. What if, as I asked earlier, we started with pilot programs by shifting just \$100,000 (0.6%) from the police budget and spent it on our kids instead? Like I said, let's spend on hope for the future rather than fear of the present.

9. What are your thoughts on school district's programs for special education students? How can the BOE better serve the special education students, and what would you do as a board member to ensure our special education students' needs are being addressed?

I am by no means an expert on special ed, but I believe the most important and effective position for the BOE to take when it come to special ed is to clearly and unanimously support these programs throughout the district. The BOE should maintain a clear policy and make sure that it's working, but should not seek to insert itself into how the policy is implemented. However, the BOE can be more supportive by being more accountable and accessible to the educators responsible for managing special ed programs across the district and within individual schools. That means listening to and learning from parents and educators about what what's working, what's not working, and why. But the BOE needs to maintain a high level role and stick to policy decisions while allowing educators on the ground the leeway to make decisions that are highly personal and individual.



10. How can the BOE address the opportunity/achievement gap in our district? What are your specific ideas and plans for addressing the achievement gap and educational equity? In your opinion, what is the role of BOE in this area?

Reducing Montclair's achievement gap is critical, but we have to avoid chasing a single, one-size-fits-all solution. I've seen this play out with a college friend who is vice principal at a public high school in the Bronx. His is a small school focusing on at-risk students, and has an impressive track record of academic success among kids no one expected to succeed. As a result, NYC politicians and the BOE spent years pushing to expand that school without success. Because part of what made the school successful was its smaller size, which gave students and parents more access to teachers. So they couldn't just quadruple enrollment and declare victory. Another factor was selecting students with parents committed to partnering with teachers. Again, not easily replicated. My point is that we shouldn't be looking for "specific ideas and plans for addressing the achievement gap." Instead, the BOE should lead by forming a committee to fast-track a study of the issue and determine its root causes. Perhaps we'll find 3 or 4 causes, then we implement 3 or 4 programs aimed at each specific cause. For instance, are there some children who don't get academic support at home? Then maybe we create after hours study halls either in-school or at the library. Or perhaps we discover that middle school girls are falling behind in math and science. Do we then offer the option for girls-only math and science classes in middle schools? The point is, we need to address each specific cause with a specific, targeted solution. But we cannot take years to do it, we need recommendations ready to go in September 2022. Then we monitor and see what's working, what's not working, and be ready to try new approaches.

11. How should the BOE balance the need to provide a quality education with the need to manage the local taxpayer burden? What should the district's capital spend priorities be? Would you consider budget cuts, if so – what specific areas would you cut?

We cannot look at the school budget in isolation. We spend over \$19,000/year per student in Montclair, so we have more than enough resources to offer every child a superior education. But we're doing a terrible job of communicating our spending priorities. So, we need to be far more efficient and transparent about what we spend and why. There are two things we could do. In the short-term, we must create a resident-friendly school and town budget so everyone can easily understand where our revenue comes from and what our spending priorities are. Longer-term, we need to enact wholesale changes to our town government. The township manager structure is shockingly wasteful and opaque. While the mayor and town council are accountable to the voters, they're effectively powerless while all budget and spending power rests in the hands of a township manager who is largely invisible to residents. So before we start talking about cutting school budgets, let's first talk about accountability, transparency and efficiency in our town government. And cut the waste generated by a ridiculously redundant township government. In that way, we can continue to invest in our children while giving taxpayers at least some relief.



12. Montclair is known for its magnet schools, which are supported by a unique school ranking and placement process and a "courtesy busing" program. What changes, if any, would you consider with respect to the magnet system, the school ranking and placement process, and/or the courtesy busing policy?

I subscribe to the adage, "If it ain't broke don't fix it." That said, I am not aware of any serious issues currently facing the magnet system, the selection process or the busing service. However, should an issue arise, the BOE must address it in a way that solves the problem without creating unintended consequences. The only acceptable changes are those that strengthen the system to provide truly equal access and opportunity for every student.