



**Holly Shaw**

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

Every Student Counts

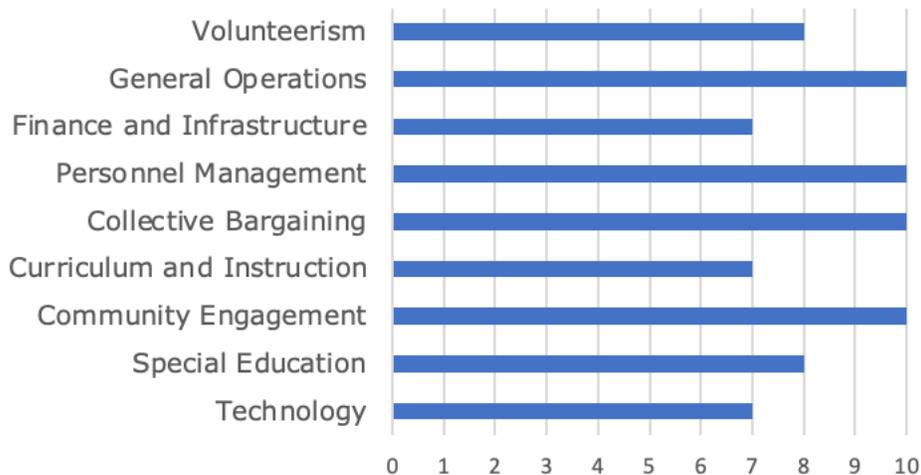
- 2. Why are you running for the BOE? Is there a particular issue that motivates you to serve on the Board of Education.

For the last eight years, I have been navigating the Montclair school district for my three children, who currently attend Watchung Elementary, Buzz Aldrin Middle School, and Montclair High School. I am lucky to have a career that allows me to work from home – I am currently a sommelier focused on writing for various wine publications. Prior to the arrival of my children, I had a career at a financial institution on Wall Street.

I graduated from a large public high school in California, which was similar to Montclair High School in terms of diversity and economics; this has given me a personal perspective on the issues we are facing here in Montclair, such as opportunity gaps and equity. I was raised by a single mother without financial resources, while living below the poverty level. I am now raising my children with more opportunities than were available to me as a child, but I am still extremely aware of the wide opportunity gap in our district. Over the past several years, I have spent countless hours advocating for my children, and I'm shocked at how difficult and ineffective our school system has become. Often I hear stories of students who have had ridiculous struggles with academics, special education, athletics, etc. I am heartbroken and convinced we can do better as a district to serve our families and children. I want to help change this, rather than just complain about it, and I believe I possess the skills necessary to help organize, communicate, and give equal resources and support to all students and families in Montclair.

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

Holly Shaw'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.

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

I am an active member of the Montclair community! As a member of the PTA, I have been involved in fundraising, classroom volunteering, organizing extra-curricular activities, and yearbook creation. I'm on the Watchung Playground committee and have fundraised for Watchung, Glenfield House, and MFEE events, including hosting and organizing teacher toasts. As a community member, I have organized fundraising efforts for a new Montclair skatepark, helped the Montclair Local newspaper, and led a Girlscout troop. I am a volunteer at MESH and Toni's Kitchen. I'm extremely passionate about this community and am never afraid to tackle a large project.

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 three things I think are most important in the district right now.

Facility repairs and upgrades are one of the most important issues for the BOE. It is essential to provide our children with safe, functional, and comfortable places to learn. The district has allowed the updating and maintenance of school buildings to fall to the bottom of the list for too long. Ventilation is crucial, but we also have to address asbestos, old buildings, ADA compliant bathrooms, and structural issues. In addition, the finance/facilities committee should make every effort to move quickly to repair the HVAC as a priority. To address this, we need to get a bond referendum on the ballot. We need to move quickly to get the bond approved by the state in May, which will allow us to get this bond on the ballot in November. If we do not act swiftly, we will have to wait until 2023 to get the referendum on the ballot – my prior experience would allow me to add value to this process. The BOE also needs to take into consideration the long-range plan developed by EI Associates and now shift to work with Parette Somjen. I believe that the biggest hurdle to getting the bond approved will be convincing taxpayers/voters, who have little confidence in our administration, by being transparent about our school needs.

Addressing the overall health of our students as they emerge from covid/remote learning should also be a top priority. We must confront the socio-emotional impact on students, learning loss, and overall academic fallout from the past two years and how lower-income students have been affected. I will work to identify any grants or funding for this agenda to help students that are in need. We need to look at how the district failed students with 504s/IEPS during remote learning and identify steps to avoid repeating those mistakes. We need to release the Start Strong testing results and give support to students in any other way we can.

Communication cannot be stressed enough. It is very important that the BOE clarifies policies, sets clear goals and timelines, and presents these to parents, teachers, and the community in a timely and easy-to-understand manner. This extends to giving Dr. Ponds communications help to effectively share with both staff and parents. A Montclair public school handbook with organizational charts, how we operate, and what services are offered would be a project I want to tackle! Our families will feel so much more confident when they feel fully informed, and our teachers will feel empowered and respected, as they should!

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?

An ideal organization places communication and transparency as a top priority, and our Montclair BOE has room to grow in this area. Mistrust within the community is a huge problem right now, but this can be remedied with town halls and open communication with parents, caregivers, and teachers. We need to set up better channels for communication and create volunteer opportunities to allow for more involvement from both parents and staff in this area. In addition, the language used in



communications can be much improved to allow for clearer messaging and calls to action. The other clear need for improvement would be regular reporting on setting both educational and district goals, giving timelines, budgets, and targets, and publishing this information very clearly. Finally, current district families should be represented on the board by having actual Montclair Public school parents as board members.

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?

Currently, there seems to be discord among the district, parents/caregivers, and the MEA. The district's involvement in the community is crucial. I would encourage regular town halls and a parent committee, with a focus on equity, communication, and assuring we are engaging all students and parents in the educational process. We have wonderful parent-run resources that we should take advantage of (SEPAC/PTAC).

The gap between the MEA and the district/BOE seems to widen as the months go on. Engaging teachers, staff, and principals in decisions or asking for input is an important first step. I've heard numerous teachers speak at the BOE meetings pleading for a spot at the table during important discussions and when critical decisions are being made. It is important to take into account these stakeholders. The teachers are in the classrooms with our children – let's listen to what they have to say.

Also, what better way is there to educate children on the role of democracy than to allow students to advocate for themselves? Let's set up systems for student advocates and teach them how to work together as a community.

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

Communication: We need to provide clear, concise, and effective communication by leveraging social media platforms, conducting regular website maintenance and condensing pertinent information to bite-sized, understandable, and important pieces delivered to parents and caregivers.

Academic Programs:

Reading: We need more resources for reading programs, whether peer-led or district-led. This is fundamental for closing the opportunity gap. We are missing opportunities to work with the Montclair Library and the Youth Services department. The universal dyslexia screening that is supposed to happen in K-2 needs to consistently happen across all schools, with more Orton-Gillingham trained staff.

AP/HH: We need to address the current lack of diversity in high honors/AP programs. Initiatives are needed to give children/parents help in middle school to prepare for a successful high school experience, as well as to advise students on how to qualify for or work towards high honors and AP classes. The current system lacks both diversity and success. Also, we need to fund the students who cannot pay for AP/SAT testing.

Sports: We need to streamline the process for paperwork and clearance for access to sports teams. The frenzy that happens as parents try to get kids approved for any sport is a result of a process that is frustrating and ambiguous.

I would also suggest that we allow children who participate in outside school programs (figure skating, dance, martial arts, etc.) to be allowed a PE exemption.

The town of Montclair would benefit immensely from middle school sports programs so that those students who have not had the opportunity to take lessons or participate in paid programs can experience these activities and can be equally prepared to participate in high school athletics.

High School: There needs to be a stronger focus on issues specific to high school (safety, academics, sports, mental health). The high school is rarely taken into consideration with district policies.



Speaking as the parent of a high schooler – this is a big issue. Where are we addressing mental health, anxiety, and the loss of learning at this level? We should be using the community as a resource for addressing high school deficiencies, and we need to offer more counseling at the high school level. In addition, we can create mentorship programs with community members to further help with college scholarship applications and applying for MADE and National honors society programs. We can ask second-semester seniors to serve as peer mentors for juniors in the college application process. There are so many ways to ease the pressure on our students that we need to consider.

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?

We need consistency, transparency, and accountability.

Currently, we don't have clear policies, procedures, or accountability for our services. As a parent, I found the administration struggled to answer what the criteria for services were and how the services were offered and that it didn't offer a clear process in terms of how to get testing. We are not operating in best practices, and at the moment we are not equitable. People with resources or influence get better services and are sometimes offered services not made available to others.

The audit was a step in the right direction, but what are we doing with the information? We still have different criteria for the same disability across schools, parents/caregivers/staff don't understand the process or procedures, and we have no resources for at-risk students.

As a BOE member, I would like to move forward with communicating and clarifying the policy and criteria, as well as with identifying how parents/caregivers can get help with what is offered. I would like to see us reform programs to incorporate kids in a less restrictive environment. We need to provide more in-class support and integration. We need a behavior disability program that could include sensory rooms. We need to offer the same services at each school, instead of forcing parents to move schools to obtain certain services. I would also like to see teachers on the committee to offer insight and ideas.

The BOE also has an opportunity to recognize and identify high-ability learners when they enter public school. Right now, Montclair is working towards compliance with state law to identify high-ability learners. The board's first job would be to approve proposals on gifted education for K-8 this spring, and the second step would be to complete compliance by rolling this out into the high school. Becoming compliant will increase support for differentiation in every classroom. Focusing on universal screening for high-ability students brings support to students who might otherwise have been misunderstood and allows us to support all students' strengths.

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?

In terms of equity and closing opportunity gaps, we are currently failing our community. The board has an important job here to ensure equity across all Montclair schools.

First, we need to offer universal free public pre-K. Offering early high-quality learning for Montclair residents would help reduce the barriers for lower-income students who don't have access to early education and tend to enter kindergarten with lower reading skills than their more privileged peers. We can work with the state to continue to advocate for state funding.

Second, we need to reconsider the algorithm for school placement to equalize diversity across our elementary and middle schools, which is not currently the case but is clearly crucial.

We need greater accountability with the district and the BOE on closing the opportunity gap. The district took very little advice from the achievement gap panel formed in 2015. We need to identify school districts that have been successful at closing opportunity gaps and learn from them.

As stated above, we need to identify ways to infuse more diversity into AP and High honors classes.



Identifying grants, scholarships and other monies that can be used specifically towards programs and staffing in order to close the gap is crucial.

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?

No one ever wants to cut a budget, but every bloated budget needs to be reviewed thoroughly and made as efficient as possible.

The lack of transparency and communication around our school budgets is a major issue. For example, there has never been an explanation of our failure to secure option 1 from the state for covid testing services.

The district's number one priority for capital spending should be HVAC and facilities upgrades. We also need to identify funds to invest in a universal pre-K, even if this is a long term goal.

Raising the quality of education and facilities ultimately improves home values and desirability of the town.

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 am a HUGE supporter of the magnet system. I would never seek to dismantle the magnet system or busing program. But, we need to fix the algorithm for placement in elementary schools, which is leading to greater segregation in the middle schools.

Currently, our schools are segregated as a result of the placement system. We need to dig out and identify the actual reasons that this is happening and change this. I believe that the district is making efforts to prevent segregation, but this is still an issue and needs to be flushed out within our community and our unique district. A new placement process needs to be established to preserve our magnet system.