



Melanie Deysher

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

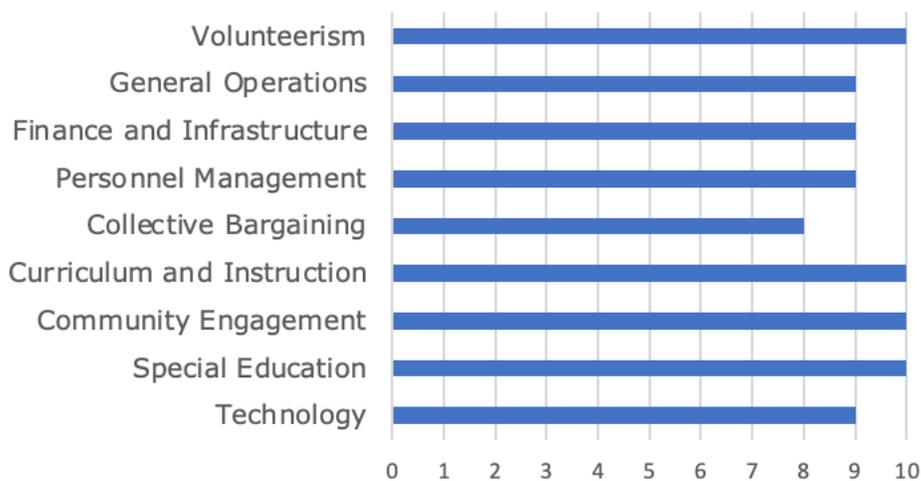
Communication, Collaboration, Educational Excellence

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

I am running for the Board of Education after having spent eight intensive years advocating for one set of related objectives: early screening and identification of kids with dyslexia and other reading struggles, and for effective, evidence-based reading instruction for all our readers. Having seen positive results from this advocacy, including the adoption of a district-wide universal screener to identify kids at risk for reading failure, I want to help make positive changes in other areas of our students' lives.

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

Melanie Deysher'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 have been an active PTA member at Nishuane, Hillside, Glenfield and the High School; co-chair of the Grow Lab at Nishuane and Hillside; co-founder and co-leader of Let's Talk About Smartphones (a group dedicated to raising awareness of the potential mental health and academic impacts that have been correlated with cell phone usage); SEPAC; the SEPAC liaison to Glenfield; co-founder and chair of SEPAC-Dyslexia Parent Network; the NAACP's Education Committee; NAACP Dyslexia Task Force; Decoding Dyslexia of NJ; and the Reading League of NJ.



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?

When talking about priorities we first need to keep in mind that the BOE's role is to set overall policy, and that the district faces more than two or three challenges. One obvious priority now involves infrastructure repairs and upgrades, and clearly we need to focus on finalizing and executing a plan to do this, and in a way that is aligned with our values. Beyond the immediate issue of facilities, I believe we need to get back to focusing on educational excellence and ensuring that the pathways to high levels of academic success should be open to all students. I would also prioritize having our BOE be more accountability-driven, especially when it comes to closing the opportunity gap. And of course we need to prioritize our teachers, and make sure they are given the resources they need to do the right thing for their kids.

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?

The board's role is to set policy to provide guidance and direction to the superintendent and administration. Every policy they approve and action they take must be based on what is best for the education of our students. By definition, informed policy making requires use of data. Data must be collected and presented both at the individual school level (rigorous, objective progress monitoring) and the district level; utilized in decision-making; and reported (with greater frequency) to stakeholders. Without data, reports to the community about educational return on investment ring hollow and are unconvincing. Communities are entitled to measurable results. (unfortunately, the data that I have seen has not shown improvements, but our children haven't really stood a chance in this environment of revolving superintendents.)

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?

Good leadership involves respecting one another. The relationship between the board and the superintendent is one of the most crucial factors in determining how well a school system functions. While board members don't always have to agree, the board must have respect for the superintendent's professional training and experience, and display trust in his leadership. We must recognize the board only has authority as a collective body and their priority must always be the best education for our students. Therefore, while not every decision will be unanimous, it is important to present one clear voice on issues. A healthy board is a board with various and differentiated opinions that is rooted in mutual respect, for each other, the superintendent and administration, teachers, parents and students. The board needs to create opportunities not merely for stakeholders to speak, but to make a commitment to incorporating stakeholder feedback into the decision making process, so all stakeholders feel truly heard.

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

I believe we need to look harder at how well we are doing in providing a strong academic foundation in our elementary schools. What happens in these early grades truly sets the stage for academic success or failure as our kids move up. Unfortunately, data suggests that not all of our kids are reaching the level of achievement needed for later success. It is also in elementary school that your belief in yourself as a student capable of success, who feels good about him/herself (or the unfortunate flip side of that) is developed. This impacts our kids across all areas; access to academic



success as well as social and emotional health. We need to collaborate with teachers and principals and give them the tools they need (resources, professional development, mentorship, and time) to succeed. We need to continue to expect high levels of teacher engagement and academic rigor at the middle schools and highschool while ensuring that ALL our children are equipped in elementary school to access these opportunities. We are doing a lot right, but that excellence needs to be spread evenly and equitably across all schools. Middle schools have begun offering some after-school programming, but we are missing an opportunity for community building with essentially private (pay to play) access to sports. Unlike other communities, we should be focusing on increasing participation in clubs and sports and find ways to include them at the district level.

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?

As a parent of children who have IEPs and 504s, I am familiar with the special ed system in this district. I applaud the district for undertaking the special ed audit. The resulting Program Review (May 2021) should be used as a roadmap on how to address long standing issues and deficits. In October, child study team members and service providers participated in professional development related to writing and implementing IEPs. This is a great first step, but we need to have mechanisms in place to provide oversight and support to ensure this training is incorporated into practice. Families need clear, relevant, individualized, measurable goals. We need to insist on rigorous progress monitoring so both the district knows if their programs are effective and parents/caregivers know if their child is making gains. We need to standardize successful programs and initiatives across buildings and clearly communicate what is offered and where to parents. Common protocols also need to be implemented across all schools. We need to collaborate with teachers to prioritize what professional development and resources are needed to best support their kids. These efforts need to include the general education program as both systems overlap and need to work together effectively. Above all we need to support, collaborate, and communicate with families.

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?

I believe that a strong literacy program that embraces evidence-based reading instruction, early screening, and effective intervention will help significantly close the opportunity gap. Unfortunately, the data show that not all children (both in general ed and special ed) are learning to read effectively. Literacy needs to lead the way, and we need to get it right in elementary school so that a critical mass of students are able to access advanced classes as they move through the grades. As several studies show, the poor first grade reader continues to be a poor reader throughout his school career, and will not have access to higher levels of academic achievement. The BOE needs to strategically abandon policies that are not working, and replace them with strong evidence-based policies and practices. This needs to be done collaboratively with teachers; teachers need to be included and supported.

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?

With the switch to a Type II system, the BOE rather than the council has control of the operating budget of the district. So watching the budget, and balancing the competing priorities of educational excellence and affordability is now a much more central task for the board. I believe providing an effective literacy program, especially in elementary school, could provide significant long term savings for the district. Research shows with early identification and prevention reading programs, the number



of children who are placed in special education can be reduced by up to 70%—and it costs about twice as much to serve a student in special education than in general education. If we were able to provide effective reading instruction for those kids in special ed, we could save the district significant money, in out of district placements and transportation. Through collaborative problem solving, the board can hopefully find ways to avoid cuts.

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?

The magnet system has done a wonderful job of creating a vibrant community, and is now core to our DNA as a district. But it is easy to forget that it was put in place as a means to an end, ending racial segregation and working towards genuine educational equity. We also need to recognize that having schools made purposefully different has some downsides, especially when it ends up being confusing and frustrating for parents and children, and when “choice” is loudly advertised but sometimes isn’t possible. So we just need to stay focused on what we are actually trying to achieve, which is classrooms that reflect the diversity of our Township, and which promote genuine equity, rather than having every school do everything differently just for the sake of it.