



Yvonne Bouknight

1. Please provide 3 words that capture your candidacy.

Transparency, Equity, Diversity

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

The children of Montclair motivate me to serve.

When one does not have a seat at the table, it is important to bring one. Recently retired, I have the time to wholeheartedly devote myself to serving on the board. The children, parents/caregivers, teachers, administrators, central office leadership and community stakeholders have entrusted the board to oversee school district initiatives, policies and regulations; a task that requires integrity, honesty, courage, knowledge and commitment.

It is essential for the Board to be inclusive of people with diverse backgrounds and knowledge who are capable of serving on its key committee areas. I have a diverse background in Language Arts Literacy education, volunteerism, and advocacy. I come to the table not with an agenda that serves myself, but one that serves my community with equity and transparency. My experiences afford me the hindsight, insight and foresight to serve the children and the greater community in partnership with the gifted faculty, district administrators, and district leadership teams.

3. Please rate your work/life experience in

Yvonne Bouknight'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.

Special Education: The last fifteen years of my career was dedicated to working with students who have special needs, primarily those identified as dyslexic as well as children in general education who weren't meeting grade level benchmarks in reading and writing. I am an IMSLEC-certified tutor, and was an Orton Gillingham fellow at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Curriculum and Instruction: I have experience as a literacy coach and design coach. My expertise on those areas encompasses coaching teachers, establishing model classrooms, aligning instruction with core content standards and district curriculum; facilitating teacher meetings, literacy and parent workshops; using data to drive instruction, and coaching teacher to implemented best literacy practices for reading and writing workshop using the Teacher's College Model.

Technology: From 2004-2018, I was employed as an adjunct professor at Kean University instructing in-service and pre-service teacher to implement technology into the curriculum.

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

I believe it is important to be present and involved in the village I chose to raise my children in, as well as give back to the city that poured life into me. I also give back to the community of faith that showed me the importance of being an advocate, supporter, teacher and learner.

The following outlines my community involvement in Montclair, the city of Newark and my faith community:

I was actively involved in the Girl Scout Council of Greater Essex and Hudson Counties, serving as Girl Scout Leader, District Leader and Girl Scout Cookie and Calendar Manager; served as a parent volunteer for class trips and special events held at Watchung School; served as co-chair of School Review and chaperoned class trips at Renaissance School; served as a parent volunteer with Lacrosse Booster Club, Civics & Government Institute (CGI) and Project Graduation at Montclair High School.

I participate in the Montclair Public Library initiative for seniors crocheting premie caps to give to preemies at local hospitals.

I am an application reader and interviewer for The Cooperman's College Scholars program, a Newark based, non-profit organization that mentors and supports selected High School Scholars as they navigate the college admissions process.

I have been actively involved in United Methodist Women for over 30 years, serving at the local, district, conference, national and international levels; served as Communication Coordinator and President at the local level; served as Secretary of Program Resources, Conference Treasurer, Transformative Education Study Leader, Legacy Endowment Fund Chairperson and Member of Charter for Racial Justice Committee at the Greater NJ Conference level; served on the Program Advisory Group as a Liaison for the Legacy



Endowment Fund, and the Technology Committee at the national level; served as a mission partner with a school in Petionville, Haiti, organizing mission trips and fundraisers to purchase school supplies and resources.

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?

During the next year, the Board needs to prioritize the mental health of the children, teachers and administrators. Our society has faced challenges, fear and emotional stress during the past 3 years. These factors have impacted learning, family dynamics and relationships. It is imperative that our community seek strategies and utilize SEL initiatives to counteract the emotional instability crisis that may be masked or hidden within our school community. When children and adults are not mentally healthy, it impacts energy level, concentration, dependability, mental ability, and optimism, hindering growth and performance at every level.

The Board also needs to prioritize clear and transparent communication with the community in order to build the trust needed to achieve strong, consistent relationships with all stakeholders.

The long-term priority should be the infrastructure of our current facilities. Our buildings are in need of major repairs. The 60-million-dollar Bond Referendum will be placed on the ballot in November. Over the course of the next few months, the Board of Education must educate and inform the voters to assure the Bond gets approved and work can begin to restore the school buildings over the course of five years.

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 functioning Board of Education is one that looks like the community it serves. The members of the board should reflect the diversity of the town and share one purpose; to uphold the mission to educate children. The ideal board does not have personal agendas, but rather strives to collectively use their strengths and ideas to effectively address community issues, challenges and concerns, regardless of differences in opinion or principles.

In order to serve the community, the Board must be in tune with the goals, dreams and desires of the students, parents, caregivers and teachers. As the gatekeeper to a thorough and efficient education, the Board must listen attentively and respond in an informed manner. Open communication and transparency build trust. Accessibility shows a sense of commitment and presence. Hosting community forums and launching a newsletter that outlines information pertinent to school and community initiatives are two ways the Board can display their dedication to communication and accessibility with the community.



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?

Relationships are built on effective communication. It is imperative that all parties feel heard; when someone feels they are not being listened to, it leads to a breakdown of trust and fractures within the relationship. A restorative justice approach is an effective way to address, rebuild and repair. The first step to improve the relationship between the Board of Education, the district administrators, the various unions and parents/caregivers is to recognize and acknowledge that someone may feel unheard or harmed. The next step would be to have an open and honest conversation with the stakeholders involved to understand their needs and concerns directly related to the state of the relationship. Lastly, those conclusions would be translated into concrete initiatives - implemented, valued and upheld by all stakeholders - designed to build healthy relationships and create a learning environment where children and adults can grow and thrive.

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

It is important to retain the talented teachers, principals, district administrators, paraprofessionals and support staff. Over the past two years people have retired, resigned to leave the profession, or taken a position in another district. There is a teacher shortage. It is a national crisis. The Montclair Public School District needs to focus on initiatives to retain and prevent teacher turnover prior to retirement.

We are currently in a partnership with Montclair State University that allows student teachers to substitute one day a week during their internship. This is a great idea, but what are we doing to retain these student teachers after they graduate? How are we inspiring current paraprofessionals in our district to further pursue a career in education? What are we doing to dissuade certified staff from resigning for an increase in salary at another district experiencing teacher shortages? Consideration should be given to offer incentives to retain the student teachers we have trained, as well as empower, recognize and honor our current staff members. The Vibrant Workplace by Dr. Paul White is a resource that will "equip leaders with ideas to transform the workplace culture, retain valued employees and build a more successful team." District leadership and administrators should explore literature-based initiatives coupled with roundtable discussions to enhance culture, consistency and pride within the district.

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 believe the Board of Education has taken the first step to improve services for our special education program. Hiring an outside consultant, GoTeach, to conduct an audit was a wise decision. The recommendations in the audit are clear and measurable, however, it is important to recognize that although change is certain, it will not happen overnight.



It is paramount that the District work closely with parents and students with special needs, alongside the Special Education Parents Advisory Council. An open line of communication with the community is essential. Some stakeholders have expressed concern and frustration regarding the lack of information available to them before, during and in some cases after the initial process. It is essential that parents and caregivers of all children have a clear passageway to understand the process that takes place when a child is evaluated.

When making changes in special education, it is highly effective to focus on student outcomes, rather than inputs. Many of our students with special needs are in the least restrictive setting, meaning they are in a general education classroom for a greater portion of the day, and at times may receive reading and writing instruction in a resource room. Special education best practices suggest that providing core instruction, like reading and writing, with the classroom teacher alongside the special education teacher yields more effective instructional support. Additionally, incorporating a model that allows teachers to master one or two subject areas can serve as a catalyst for students to reach their Individual Education Plan goals within the expected time frames stated in their plan; just as students are gifted and talented in one or two areas, the same holds true for special and general education teachers.

Improving the special education program will be challenging. The Parental Rights in Special Education 2019 State Report suggests a multi-year initiative, inclusive of a three-year plan with one set of ideas defining clear goals and benchmarks. We have begun the journey. When open minds come together, ready to make a difference in what is not working, ready to discuss the why and ready to establish one set of ideas with clear goals and objectives, the outcome will glean positive results.

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?

As a collaborative group, the Board should strive to create a positive learning environment by providing students and staff with the tools, training and facilities needed to promote continuous student growth.

Historically throughout the United States and the world, the achievement gap exists. Montclair Public Schools have a dedicated group of phenomenal teachers assuring that children are safe, learning and thriving in Montclair. We are rated as a high performing NJ school system. Math proficiency reports 55% proficiency vs 44% avg NJ schools, while Reading reports 68% proficiency vs 57% statewide avg. Unfortunately, there is still room for improvement.

In 2015, our Achievement Gap panel reported that on the 2014 standardized test, white students and students of color standardized test scores showed disparities at all state tested levels by significant points. In addition, the report showed that the make-up of MHS students enrolled in High Honors Algebra I and II and AP courses had disparities as well.

According to the 1966 Coleman Report, standardized tests are the contributing factor



used to determine the achievement gap. However, there are other factors that enter into the Gap conversation. As a district we must look at the incline and decline of economics, the increasing numbers of english language learners, students with special needs, time spent out of school, mental health, test-taking strategies and so much more in order to get a clearer picture of why there is an achievement gap in Montclair.

The Montclair community is in a great position because our Board of Education, leadership, Administration, teachers and the community at large recognize and are willing to talk about the issue with transparency. We have been working to close the achievement gap for several years, and I believe there have been some strides along the way. In our continued efforts, it is important that we identify successes that can be replicated, as well as ineffective actions that should not be repeated.

Community partnerships are welcomed and needed, however, the real work on closing the achievement must take place within the classroom. Teachers must have the tools readily available to create and plan for effective instruction. The greatest impact to transform and close the achievement gap is contained in the recommendation outlined in the Special Education Audit, 'create a systemic PK-5 approach to language arts in general education and special education settings that includes best practice interventions, revised curriculum and fidelity of implementation of programs and resources for literacy.' Best ELA practices and interventions in the early education of a child are paramount to bridging and breaking through the gaps that may exist in achievement. Literacy is a major player in all areas of achievement; if a child struggles with reading, writing or oral language they may, in many cases, struggle in other academic areas. Having a systematic and balanced literacy approach is essential. All children should have the opportunity to receive the same resources and materials in all of our district schools. Adopting the systemic approach in our PK-5 LAL curriculum is the one idea that can bring us one step closer to closing the achievement gap in Montclair.

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?

Providing students with quality education is a common goal in Montclair. The tax burden that Montclair homeowners incur is not just a concern for Montclair residents; many towns within our state that have similar economics, diversity, and real estate value are experiencing the same concerns. However, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, support staff and successful programs should be the last option when considering budget cuts.

The formula used by the state to fund public school is one that we, as an individual town, cannot control. The state of New Jersey as early as 1875, had a constitutional amendment that required the state to provide "maintenance and support" for a system of free public schools for New Jersey children. There are a variety of factors, including teachers' salaries, cost of supplies, and rate of inflation considered as part of school funding, but the main goal is to assure that all students in the state of New Jersey who attend public schools have a "Thorough and Efficient " education.

As a longtime resident, I believe that although taxes are the primary source for funding



our schools, it is worth it. My children participated and excelled in several school and community sponsored activities, competed among some of the best students in the country at the collegiate level and successfully entered a competitive workforce as a result of attending our public schools.

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?

Montclair is known countrywide for the work and efforts of the Magnet Schools Task Force which, prior to 1977, was designed to desegregate our school system. This was not and still should not be an initiative that should be taken lightly. It is recognized as the one ideal that has given us a system that has worked. It is just one of the many things that has allowed us to be known as a system that is ranked in the top 7% among high schools in this country.

Historically, the Montclair Public Schools are known throughout the country for the ten plus years prior to the 1977 initiative that opened enrollment to desegregate our public schools. The shoulders we stand upon worked tireless hours to assure that a fair and equitable process would be used to place students in one of three school choices that are ranked and selected by the parent. This placement formula is a federal ruling created to, "maintain the diversity and uniqueness of our public schools for which many parents move to Montclair."

I believe the magnet system is a system that works because it allows the child to flourish, develop, and learn within a community that is aligned with their learning styles. With each magnet comes a specialized curriculum that is impeded into the academics. The ELA curriculum design, however, is an academic area that I believe should not be compromised or look different because of the school building. I stand firm on the idea that English Language Arts is the basis for success in all areas of learning. Research suggests Reading and Writing instruction should be aligned and taught using a systemic approach that takes into account that reading is not a natural act, but rather learned based on the instruction children receive. English Language Arts instruction should assure that all learners are given the same opportunities within and across grade levels and school buildings. If one school is using the Teacher's College, Open Court or any other model with success, then all schools across the district should be given the same resources and tools. Shared curricula language will ensure smoother transitions, as well as a foundational consistency for children within our school district.