

I am running for the Board of Education because I think it is time for a change. The current Board members have not been challenged. Brian Bonnano stated at 'Meet the Candidates' night, one of his qualifications for continuing on the Board of Education is that he has served on the Board for nine years. Is he proud of what the schools have become? We have schools that are in the bottom third ranking of State. We have spending that is out of control. We have the worst communication with the community that I have ever seen. We have violence taking over our schools. With the recent events at a South Jersey high school this week I think that violence would be one of the most important issues to the Board; apparently we have conflicting stories about how many fights we have at a school.

**What is my platform?** I want **communication** to become a priority via television and the internet. I want an independent review of the books so we can identify ways to **spend smarter**. I want **appropriate placements** for children so everyone can learn. And, **I want the community to want be involved**.

**Why do I think I am qualified?** I am a 'townie' meaning that I grew up in Franklin, left for a little while and came back here to raise my kids. Between my husband and me we have six children ranging from 23 to 10. I've seen what works in public, Catholic, special Ed and private schools. My children have either graduated or are about to graduate (on June 28<sup>th</sup> ☺) from Franklin public schools. I am well acquainted with the special education services in Franklin.

I work for a management consulting firm that works with a lot of not-for-profits and government teaching them how to do better business. At the 'Meet the Candidates' night, all of the other candidates talked about their special college degrees. I never graduated from college. I was a single parent of three children and could afford neither the time nor the money to attend college. When I registered for college a few years ago, thinking it was finally my turn, my father became very sick and I had to care for him so I put college on a back burner again. If I to live my life all over again I would have attended college immediately after high school but I wouldn't have given up the opportunity to spend time raising my children and taking care of my father. But the people in any elected office are supposed to be a fair representation of the community they serve. I believe that I have (as others on the Board do) the most important qualification: **I am a Mom and I care!**

**Why am I running?** I don't like what is going on in our schools. I recently had a conversation with an older couple and they asked who was in charge when we went to school. In their case it was the teacher. In my case it was the principal. We all agreed that now it is the children. They are going to school to be taught, not to teach. The violence and disruptions are out of control. The kids who want to learn can't. I don't believe that all of our placements for kids are appropriate. Some kids thrive in a mainstreamed public school environment, but some might need the resources of an alternative program or extra resources within the mainstreamed school environment.

I also think that we aren't going to change the problems in our schools in the next 10 minutes. It took a long time for the schools to get this out of control and it will take some time for them to get back on track.

I do think that results need to be measurable and attainable though. If our scores are at 65, don't set goals of raising them to 95 by the end of the year. It won't happen. If we set goals at 70, that is attainable.

I also think everyone should be held accountable for what is going on in our schools. It isn't just the Board. Parents need to be involved. Kids need to be motivated. The teachers and

administration should get a report card too. And taxpayers should be involved. It is our money. We should want to know where it is being spent and that it is being spent wisely.

I also think that communication is horrible in our town and I hope I have come up with some solutions that will be implemented. Hopefully, with your help, we can start making changes on April 18<sup>th</sup>.

As a new candidate, we had the opportunity to attend a workshop sponsored by the NJ School Board Association. It was one of the best workshops I have ever attended. I learned a lot. Most importantly, what is the role of the Board of Education? The two directives of the Board of Education are to set policies and communicate with the public. We implement our policies through the Superintendent of Schools. It is his job to ensure that our policies are being set and it is our job to hold him accountable. I also learned from one of the instructors, who hold an MBA in Finance; school budgets are unlike any other budget. She works with budgets all day and still had difficulties understanding school budgets. Therefore, NJ School Board Association offers a class to its members on understanding budgets which, if elected, I plan on taking. They also offer certification for BOE members, which I would also take. I'm not asking for the BOE to pay for these classes, I would. In fact, I think it would be wonderful for the residents of Franklin Township to take the budgeting class as well so they could better understand how a school budget works, kind of like '**Budgeting 101.**'

**Budget.** The spending is out of control. While I don't necessarily disagree with what we spend, it is **how we spend**. I applaud the current Board for cooperative spending but I think we need to look at other funding avenues. I work with a lot of not-for-profits and the trends in funding from the government, corporations and foundations have changed. It makes sense that it would change for the schools as well.

At the new high school did they look at solar panels that could easily have been funded with grant money and in turn the school would have been able to sell that energy back to PSE&G? Not only would it have saved money it would also be a learning experience for the kids on technology. I learned that the BOE did look at solar panels but at that point in the design they felt it would have been too expensive to include the solar panels. Brian Bonnano brought up that the available grant money for solar panels was meager. I disagree. First of all, I did a quick search on available grant monies and found that one foundation has \$1.5 million available for alternative energy sources. While we probably wouldn't have gotten the entire grant, some money is better than no money. Also, I don't necessarily think that taxpayers would mind paying a little more now for something that would generate income later.

At the BOE meeting when the budget was discussed, Pine Grove & Conerly needed their playgrounds repaired. SGS also needs a new roof. While I don't disagree that children need a safe place to play, perhaps that could have been funded, at least partially, with an alternative funding source such as grants or a Friends Group. Then all three schools could have gotten what they need this year. I was also told that MacAfee Road School had a fundraiser to pay for their playground. There are not-for-profits that are dedicated to playground restoration with private funding. Maybe we should look into that alternative funding source. At SGS School, they are hosting a 'Support a Seat' fundraiser. Congratulations Mr. Grippo for looking at alternative funding sources to refurbish the auditorium.

High school graduation - when I went with my son to find out about graduation I was told that it was being held at Sovereign Bank Arena in Trenton. Why is that when we just spent all this money on the new high school? I was told by an administrator at the High School that because the entire budget didn't pass and they had to make some cuts like air conditioning in the gym. I asked why graduation couldn't have been held on the grass under tents with fans blowing, but I was just reminded to vote for the stadium funding at the upcoming election. We were told that my son would be bused the day before and day of graduation for rehearsal. Isn't that more expensive

than getting out of the contract with Sovereign Bank Arena and hosting on the lawn of the high school? We didn't have air conditioning when I went to Franklin High. Not only does that cost a lot of money but it also excludes people from attending graduation because it is in Trenton. I was told by a member of the BOE that the reason graduation is being held at Sovereign Bank Arena is because they got a great multi-year contract to hold it there. I am assuming that this was started when the old high school could not accommodate all of the kids and their families. When I brought up the tent idea, I was told that they felt it might exclude some people because there wouldn't be enough room. I think they need to rent bigger tents because they would still cost less than Sovereign Bank Arena. I also feel that it will exclude a lot of families who can't make the 1-hour ride to Trenton. This Board member also told me that the administrator who told me about the air conditioning in the high school was an example of poor communication. I think Mr. Wilson needs to increase communication with his staff before they misinform the parents.

Speaking of elections for a stadium, don't special elections cost money? Why that couldn't have waited until April 18<sup>th</sup> and put on the ballot with everything else? If we needed to cut money from the budget that would have save us approximately a few thousand dollars. Isn't that a playground or a start on a new roof?

That is another thing - **is it what the school needs or what the school wants?** I am not sure that funding priorities are in order. I agree with Tuf and I feel very strongly that we should **open the books up to an independent review**. Not to tell us that we don't need 10 pencils but to look at what we are spending and teaching us to **spend smarter**.

**FAPE.** I attended a Board meeting and one of the people on the Board did not know what it meant. She thought - Free And Public Education. FAPE is an acronym for **Free** and **Appropriate Public Education**. I don't think all of our placements are appropriate. There are kids in the classroom who are focused and want to learn. There are teachers who want to teach. There are some kids who might have a handicapping condition and generally want to learn. But their handicapping condition might be getting in the way. If this kid is disruptive in any way it should generate a referral that eventually warrants a Child Study Team evaluation. That evaluation could determine whether that child needs special resources made available, a contained classroom, or alternative placement. I am really glad that Mr. Westfield is experienced in special education and is an advocate of out-of-district placements. However, out-of-district placements are not cheap - in excess of \$25,000 plus bussing. If that student wants to participate in extra-curricular activities the district is responsible for sending a bus to pick him up so that he can participate. That child, provided they have not committed a crime on school property, can attend all functions at their school because they are still considered to be a student of the Franklin Township school district.

We had a program at the High School a few years ago called the BD (or Behaviorally Disturbed Program). While the name is horrible, I thought the program was great. The children were contained in a classroom and the two teachers switched rooms. They were mainstreamed for their specials. It allowed them to feel like a part of the school instead of excluded.

Another, less expensive option is a Naples placement which is something that we don't typically do in Franklin. A Naples placement would be if a private school provided the best learning environment and a parent could pay for any psychological services that you would normally receive for a handicapping condition. These types of programs usually cost less than the more traditional out-of-district placements.

I was recently told by members of the Child Study Team when they called to discuss graduation with me, that I have been a very involved parent. We have incredible Child Study Teams. In my experience with them I have found them to be very compassionate, knowledgeable and strong advocates for the children. My experiences also taught me that while the CST knows what is going on, they are frequently road blocked by the Administration. They either don't or don't want to know what the rules are and their interpretation of the 504 Rules from Trenton are

referred to as “Franklinsims.” What I learned from the CST is invaluable. While they were thanking me for being involved, I had to thank them for going the extra mile for my child and caring about the most appropriate learning environment for my child and trying to make sure that my child became all that he could be. The most important thing to the Child Study Teams is parent involvement.

I think that if we removed some of the disturbances from the classrooms and placed these kids appropriately, it would free up the teachers time to teach and all of the kids would have an environment conducive to learning which, is part of the Board’s mission statement. Obviously I am very passionate about special education and have learned the laws from Trenton, not Franklin.

**Violence.** There’s a lot of it. What do we do about it is the question. This partially goes to appropriately placing students in the correct environment. But it also goes to accountability and consequences.

I had a pediatrician one time who told me that the way to discipline my child was to be fair, firm and consistent. A child psychologist told me that if you are going to discipline a child they should understand the consequences for their actions. In my experiences and my conversations with others in the community, Franklin schools are not fair in their discipline. We should not be looking at race, religion, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic situation or any other factors. We should look at the action. We have a Discipline Code that should be the same for all children. At the beginning of the school year, in an assembly, the Discipline Code should be read and the students should be advised that it will be enforced.

I thought we had zero tolerance for violence in our schools. Are these kids being placed in alternative programs for their violent outbursts? While the consequences are laid out in the Student Discipline Code, I don’t think that they are always enforced and I think the kids know that.

If you provoke a violent altercation or bring drugs or weapons to school - you are out. There are schools that can handle that type of child better than our school district is trained to do. But these programs are not cheap. But look at the long term cost. How many students learned anything that was taught in the classroom on the day of the fight at the high school? How long did the rumors interfere with the actual learning process? I’m sure there were a lot of notes passed around school the week following the fight that probably filtered its way down to Sampson. If a student has enough referrals for disruptive behavior in the classroom it is supposed to generate a Child Study Team evaluation. If the parent doesn’t want to comply because they don’t want their child labeled as handicapped then the school should explain the resources that would become available to their child if they were classified and that the child might eventually be de-classified. But in the interim the student could be placed in an environment where they could learn and eventually (hopefully) become a productive member of society. If we allow the violence to continue by not holding people accountable, then rather than molding our future we are creating future drains on society via public assistance, courts, etc. Personally I’d rather uphold our current discipline code now than have to build more jails in the future.

**Communications.** In the recent incident at the high school I heard a lot of conflicting stories about what went on and how many fights there actually were. One awesome student stood up at a board meeting and said that there were 16 fights. He was told by the board that there was only one fight. Other students I spoke with said there was more than one fight. If I was on the Board, what would I have said? The truth. If there was one or 100 fights, it was too many. I would have told people immediately exactly what happened and what the Board was doing to prevent future incidences like this one from occurring. Without mentioning names, I would also have said what consequences were meted out for those involved in the fight. If consequences are enforced then the next time you’ll think twice.

Another thing I would support would be the BOE website. Use it. Create a message board that would allow people to voice their concerns. The Board could then have its finger on the pulse of the community. If a rumor springs up on the message board, it could be dealt with right then and there instead of allowing it to get out of control. I am aware that there are many other message boards that discuss the Franklin schools but you want the community to speak on the BOE site.

People are afraid of not knowing what is truth or fiction. If treated with respect and like adults and told the truth immediately it lets them know that the Board is putting their cards on the table. Not hiding what we don't want the public to know what it already knows. Yes, there is violence in our schools.

Speaking of the website, why not take the Franklin Township BOE Procedures Manual, scan it and make it searchable text on the BOE website? The business classes could scan the document and then bookmark the various chapters. The programming class could write code to be able to search for information. Every time there is an update it could be included in this document and highlighted on the site so everyone knows about new procedures.

Create a page on the BOE website for teachers to post the students' work. If the children have a great art project, scan it in. If someone wrote a great essay, scan it in. Personally, if my children had their work posted on a community site I would visit it; have my family visit it as well as my friends. It is great press highlighting the positive things our children do and it is an excellent way to involve family members. "Go see the great picture Lindsay did. It's on the BOE website!"

One of the hot trends in volunteerism is "Family Volunteer" opportunities. If we created a page on the BOE website that listed volunteer opportunities that a family could do together we would get participation from our students' families. I think that we would even get other community members to volunteer!

Flood our newspapers with positive press releases. While I understand that previous Board members courted the newspapers to get them to write about our successes, to no avail. If we write about all of the good things we have going on in Franklin, eventually one piece will get printed.

Another method of communication I would use is to videotape BOE meetings. I never attended these meetings before I decided to run. It wasn't convenient. At 7:30 I had homework, dinner, bath and bedtimes. As my children got older, I was just getting home from work. If these meetings were taped by the students in a multi-media class (as a hands-on learning experience) and then transcribed (by the typing class at the high school) I could watch it when I wanted to, borrow it from the library or read the transcript on the website. I could fast forward through the stuff that didn't interest me. I know the school year is almost over, but I would make broadcasting BOE meetings a priority to get the community and students involved.

Another great method of communication would be to post the BOE meetings on FTTV (Channel 25). We broadcast the Council meetings and other local programming but we don't broadcast the days and times of BOE meetings. I also think we should take advantage of Patriot Media's Channel 8 Community Bulletin Board. Post our events everywhere and get people to attend.

We need to share Best Practices with successful school districts. Find out what is working in their districts and, if appropriate, try to implement it in our schools. Hopefully we'll reach a point where we can share our Best Practices with other, less successful, districts. By sharing our ideas and successes (and failures that we can learn from) we can make Franklin Township a community that encourages new ideas.

**In closing** I am running because I think I can make a difference. I care. I am open, honest and very hard working. My ideas are simple and inexpensive (if not free). If I believe in something I throw myself into it 110%. I would really like your vote on April 18<sup>th</sup>. I'll work hard for you and especially for the children. But I'll need your help. It is statistically proven that children whose parents (and community) are involved succeed. **Together, let's make the Franklin Township School District a success!**

Sincerely,  
Nancy LaCorte