

SCHOOL BOARD RACES: Candidate file in PRSD, WW-P, Montgomery

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Voters will have no shortage of candidates to choose from in the school elections in April.

Three seats are open on the Princeton Regional Board of Education, one representing the borough and two for the township. All seats are three year terms.

Board President Alan Hegedus and board member JoAnn Cunningham did not file for reelection.

Three candidates are running for two open seats representing the township, including newcomer Molly Chrein of Ridgeview Road.

Ms. Chrein previously worked as a public defender in New York City and Maryland, but has been a stay-at-home mom since her son, Nathaniel, entered kindergarten six years ago. Her daughter, Lily, is an eighth grader at John Witherspoon Middle School.

Her experience as a PTA volunteer and president and on the board of the Princeton Education Foundation sparked her interest to run for the school board, she said.

"I'm dedicated to public education," she said. "As a stay-at-home mom, I still want to be active and an asset to my community. I hope this is a great opportunity to work for the community on an issue I'm passionate about."

Also running is newcomer Afsheen Shamsi of William Paterson Court. She works in the nonprofit sector, she said, for the New Jersey chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations.

In her work, she has helped victims of discrimination and bullying in schools, she said. She said she was approached by current school board members to run. A resident Princeton for four years, and her 11-year-old son is in the district's autism program, she said.

"I have to say they've just done a tremendous job in educating him, so I welcome this opportunity to give back," she said.

She also said it's an important time to get involved in the schools, and encouraged others to do the same.

"This is a time of great fiscal challenge for the school district, and I'd really like to encourage people to get involved, come to the budget hearings, find meaningful ways to contribute to the solution of the challenges we're facing," she said. "I encourage people, if you've ever thought about getting involved, this is the perfect time."

The third township candidate, incumbent Dorothy Bedford of Prospect Street, could not be reached for comment.

Andrea Spalla of Maple Street is running unopposed for the open borough seat. She is currently a stay-at-home mom and adjunct instructor at Mercer County Community College in remedial reading. Before her son was born, she worked as an attorney in New York City, she said.

A native of Minnesota, she said she has always been committed in principle to public education.

"As a personal matter, I believe public education should be excellent," she said. "That's one of the reasons we chose Princeton to raise our family."

She said that through her involvement in the schools, as president of the Community Park PTO, she has come to appreciate how well the schools are run under tightening financial constraints.

"I've just been so impressed with the student outcomes for all students, and I just felt really strongly that working to continue that excellence that everybody in Princeton has come to expect is something I want to spend my time doing," she said.

In Montgomery, four candidates have come forward for three open seats on the Board of Education. They include two incumbents, Andrea Bradley and Reginald Luke.

Ms. Bradley, who lives in Skillman, has served on the school board for six years. A stay-at-home mom, she said she is actively involved as a parent volunteer and consistently attends community and school athletic, music and other events.

"I am running for reelection for many reasons, but most importantly because I am deeply committed to and would like to ensure the continued vitality of the work underway in the school district to standardize the high quality of teaching and learning that occurs in every one of our classrooms," she said.

She added that, considering the turbulent economic times, she offers years of experience in school budgeting.

"I believe my experience on the Board with all of the funding and budgeting issues we've faced in the past six years will be invaluable as the board moves forward," she said.

Mr. Luke, a resident of Belle Mead, could not be reached for comment.

Two new candidates have come forward, including Leigh Yu of Belle Mead, a professor of genetics at Rutgers University.

"Having been an educator for over twenty years, I am keenly aware of the impact of education on one's career and life," he said. "As a resident of the Montgomery Township School District and a parent of two students, I would like to contribute my experience and support to our schools by serving on the Board of Education."

The other candidate, Shalini Bhargava of Belle Mead, is a scientist by profession and also a homemaker.

"I have chosen to run because I believe our school systems are our greatest resource," she said. "I have two children attending Montgomery schools and I experience first hand how good these schools are, and I want to contribute towards ensuring that our schools stay our greatest resource."

No candidates from Rocky Hill came forward to represent the borough in the newly merged district.

The seat held by board member Randie Zimmerman, who was appointed by the County Superintendent of Schools to represent Rocky Hill until April, will be eliminated and the board will go back to nine members.

The borough's legal action opposing the merger is in front of a Somerset County Superior Court Judge, who heard oral arguments on the case in January. Briefs she requested were submitted two weeks later.

In West Windsor-Plainsboro, there are five candidates vying for two West Windsor seats, incumbents Robert Johnson and Hemant Marathe, and newcomers Rakesh Kak, Vijay Kanchi and Scott Powell. In Plainsboro, incumbent Ellen Walsh and Harshad Tanna are vying for one seat. All seats are three years.

Mr. Johnson, a West Windsor resident, was elected to the board in 2007. During that time he has served as vice president, chair of the Finance Committee, liaison to the Mercer County School Boards Association and liaison to the West Windsor Planning Board. An administrator with the United States Marshals Service, he has a bachelor's degree in philosophy and English, and a master's degree in education from the State University of New York.

Mr. Marathe was elected to the school board in 2007. He is the current president, a member of the Curriculum Committee and liaison to the West Windsor-Plainsboro Education Foundation. He is president of a software development and consulting business and earned a master's degree in electrical engineering from Virginia Tech, and a doctorate in electrical engineering from the University of Washington.

Mr. Powell is director of fee based annuities for Prudential Financial. He has a master's degree in business administration finance from the University of Southern California, Marshall School of Business and a bachelor's degree mechanical engineering from Carnegie-Mellon University Pittsburgh.

"I decided to run for the school board so that I may influence the educational process for all the residents of West Windsor. I have one child attending school in the district at Maurice Hawk Elementary School and another who will enter the district in 2011. In addition to my interest in ensuring the highest possible education for my children, I have two core beliefs that drove my interest in joining the board. First, by ensuring that our district provides the best education possible, the school board performs a fiduciary duty to its residents to maximize the value of their properties. Second, in an increasingly challenging fiscal environment, I can help find ways to continue providing an excellent education at a lower cost," he said.

Mr. Kak, who has a background in finance and negotiations, said he wants to put his skills and experience to work for the community. Mr. Kak has been a resident of West Windsor since 2004 and is on the board of the Le Parc Homeowners Association.

"The main reason I am running is to volunteer my time and services to my community. I feel that I would be able to contribute positively to the board's activities based on my experience on Wall Street," he said.

Ms. Walsh has been a resident of Plainsboro since 1997 and a member of the school board since 2004. She has served as chair of the Administration and Facilities Committee and she is the parent of two High School South graduates.

"I am seeking reelection to the Board of Education because I value the work that the board does and want to continue to be part of that work. I have been heavily involved with the policy and facility issues and feel that I can contribute my six years of knowledge and experience to the continuing improvement of both of these areas. The community values the excellence of our

schools and the Board of Education has strived for increasing excellence rather than maintaining it," she said.

Mr. Tanna is a senior scientist with Telcordia Technologies, Piscataway. He has lived in the WW-P district with his wife, Mauna, and two daughters for 10 years. He immigrated to America from India and became a citizen last year. He has a master's degree in electrical engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology.

"I am a strong proponent of the public education system and believe that it is a great equalizer that affords every child the opportunity to succeed in life."

Mr. Kanchi could not be reached for comment.

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