



Who We Are

Jersey City Together is a broad-based, non-partisan organization of religious congregations, non-profits, parent organizations, and tenant groups working together to address issues in our city. We work on issues important to our members and our communities -- in particular issues related to housing affordability, education, public safety, and criminal justice.

In late 2017, Jersey City Together began to re-organize and strengthen its education team, working hand-in-hand with parent leaders, parent councils, and PTAs. Since that time, we've listened to more than 1,500 parents in small gatherings across the city and virtually. We have continued this listening during the current pandemic.

This non-partisan candidate questionnaire was developed by the Jersey City Together Education Team.

What This Is

Jersey City Together's Education Team sent out our non-partisan questionnaire to all candidates running for the Jersey City Board of Education. It is meant strictly for informational purposes. We do not endorse candidates.

We provided the following instructions for candidates:

Please complete the top informational section and answer the open-ended questions below. Please keep your answers to each of the questions to 100 words or fewer. Longer responses will be cut at the 100-word mark. Additionally, if you would like us to include a photo on your information sheet, please send the photo as a separate attachment on the email.

Jersey City Together is strictly non-partisan and does not endorse candidates for office.

In a few instances, candidates went beyond the 100 word limit. Where that was the case, we allowed them to finish their sentence. We then note on the answer if an answer was shortened.

We have compiled answers using the order in which candidates are placed on the ballot. The candidates are all seeking 3-year terms.

We have kept candidates' responses to one page.

If you have questions or concerns, you can reach out to our education team by emailing education@njtogether.org.

Candidate Name: Lorenzo Richardson
Ballot Position: 11
Slate (if applicable): Education Matters



Why are you running for the Jersey City Board of Education? Why do you think you are qualified to serve? I ran for the school board to help make a difference in the lives of all children by working to ensure they get a quality education like I did. It also gives me an opportunity to give back to the school district I attended and the children in my community. I would like the opportunity to continue to support our children with their educational needs, improving the safety and security of our facilities, address school funding and ensure equity for all students. I believe I'm qualified because I have committed over 20 years of my life to the support of our public school district. *[Answer shortened]*

What are your priorities in regard to supporting students and families during the current COVID-19 pandemic?

- 1) Ensure our students, staff and parents are healthy and safe and that our district has the resources they need to help our children learn.
- 2) Reopen our schools safely and address the long-term facility issues.
- 3) Continue to address the budget issues and the inequity within our school district.
- 4) Improve student achievement and school climate and culture.

The Jersey City Public Schools are facing a worsening fiscal crisis amidst a nationwide economic crisis. JCPS are historically underfunded by more than \$100 million and expect continued losses of state funding over the coming years. What are your plans to alleviate this crisis and ensure that our schools are adequately funded going forward?

For the past several years, I have been working with the board and the administration to address the revenue shortfalls the district has been dealing with. We were able to overcome three straight years of massive state cuts without major layoffs. We have also been in a continuous process of looking for cost savings in several areas, finding additional revenue sources, reorganizing for efficiencies and minimizing administrative costs. The district is also in litigation with the state over underfunding and facility responsibilities during state takeover to recoup these needed resources.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the district (other than funding or COVID-19) and how would you address these issues during your term?

Student achievement, facility upgrades, population growth and equity. I am working with the board and the administration to take a deep data dive into our student data to assess and address student achievement and equity. Additionally, we are working on developing a comprehensive strategic plan and long range-facilities plan to address our facilities and the city's growing population. We also would like to have more staff reflect the student population and the administration is working with the board to address this when recruiting.

How will you work to improve special education and the treatment of children with special needs in the district, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We have requested information from the Special Education department on this issue and the department has added additional resources and is proactively recruiting more staff to meet the individual needs of Special Education students. When the Superintendent determines it is safe enough to reopen, they will return to the classroom with these additional resources. We are also conducting an audit to see how we can further improve Special Education services in all aspects.

How do you plan to prioritize transparency and communication for parents, students, educators, and the general public about issues affecting the Jersey City Public Schools?

During the budget season, we arranged several public meetings on the budget requesting community, staff and parent input after presenting the budget and the funding gap. We open up our meetings and provide committee meeting minutes to inform the public about our discussions and agenda. We hold parent meetings twice a month and report what was discussed. Our board members visit schools, churches and community groups to hear concerns and work with the administration to address issues. We are accessible and share information in our meetings, via facebook or on the district website. The district also sends a weekly robocall.

Candidate Name: Gina Verdibello
Ballot Position: 21
Slate (if applicable): Education Matters



Why are you running for the Jersey City Board of Education? Why do you think you are qualified to serve?

Having the honor of serving as a Trustee for the Jersey City Public Schools for the last 1.5 years, it has provided me with the opportunity to address many of the inequities I first observed when my oldest daughter first started attending P.S. 38 in Greenville. Initially, I ran for the school board to improve the educational facilities of the District Schools. I also demanded that the school lunches be improved in order to provide all of the District's students with properly balanced and nutritious meals. Both of these issues are further impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. *[Answer shortened]*

What are your priorities in regard to supporting students and families during the current COVID-19 pandemic?

Re-open our schools safely and address the long-term facility issues. In the last few weeks, Board Trustee Lekendrick Shaw and myself have been checking in at schools to see what progress has been made. In addition to facilities, I want to make sure that our students have everything that they need for online learning such as computers, hot spots and books. Continue to address the budget issues and the inequity within our school district.

The Jersey City Public Schools are facing a worsening fiscal crisis amidst a nationwide economic crisis. JCPS are historically underfunded by more than \$100 million and expect continued losses of state funding over the coming years. What are your plans to alleviate this crisis and ensure that our schools are adequately funded going forward?

We are looking to find alternative revenues that offset our state aid reductions with grants and shared services with the city.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the district (other than funding or COVID-19) and how would you address these issues during your term?

The three areas I see that are challenges in our District are:

- 1) Upgrades to facilities and removal of outdated trailers
- 2) Increasing graduation rates
- 3) Hiring more teachers to offset the ballooning classes

With regards to the facilities issue, the District is preparing a long range facilities plan to address the facility issues in our district. The Cares Act money also helps to update the facilities so that the students and staff can return to school. With regards to the graduation rate, we have amazing teachers and wonderful programs in each of our public High Schools that provide an array of programs for students to choose from. *[Answer shortened]*

How will you work to improve special education and the treatment of children with special needs in the district, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Special needs community is a major part of our district. Board Trustee Lekendrick Shaw and myself head the A Harry Moore Ad Hoc committee where we talk to teachers, staff and parents to discuss the re-opening of their school and what their needs are since being displaced. In addition, their 5 year contract was approved to sustain positions from being replaced. Before the COVID, I was working closely with the Special Education Parent Advisory Council SEPAC to support their needs and listen to parents concerns. We have requested information from the Special Education department on this issue and the department has added additional resources and is proactively recruiting more staff to meet the individual needs of Special Education students. *[Answer shortened]*

How do you plan to prioritize transparency and communication for parents, students, educators, and the general public about issues affecting the Jersey City Public Schools?

I currently do that now by hosting (with Trustee Shaw) Parent and Community Committee meetings every other week (twice a month). This is an opportunity for parents to directly engage with both members of the Board and the central administration to address any issues they might have. Since the pandemic, we have had an increase of participants from about 10 to 55. The Superintendent sends out weekly robo calls.

Candidate Name: Lekendrick Shaw
Ballot Position: 3I
Slate (if applicable): Education Matters



Why are you running for the Jersey City Board of Education? Why do you think you are qualified to serve?

Being on the school board is important work as it helps shape the outcome of children's success. As a product of the JCPS system much of my success is owed to JC public schools to demonstrate my appreciation serving on the school board is my way to contribute. I am qualified to serve on the board as I have a diverse background with knowledge in several areas such as financial services, education and government.

What are your priorities in regard to supporting students and families during the current COVID-19 pandemic?

I would like to continue to focus on after care services as there is a big void that needs to be filled right now as some parents are struggling with the virtual learning process.

The Jersey City Public Schools are facing a worsening fiscal crisis amidst a nationwide economic crisis. JCPS are historically underfunded by more than \$100 million and expect continued losses of state funding over the coming years. What are your plans to alleviate this crisis and ensure that our schools are adequately funded going forward?

The best practical steps to address budget issues are to identify alternative revenue sources while continuing to monitor current appropriations. Also, further collaboration should take place amongst the various entities responsible for the budget. I am a staunch supporter of fully funding our public schools as noted when passing our most recent budget.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the district (other than funding or COVID-19) and how would you address these issues during your term?

One of the biggest challenges the district face is having a good balance of equity and inclusion in a uniform fashion across all schools. The level of services differ greatly across the schools throughout the district. One way I have addressed these issues during my tenure is by advocating that we have uniformed principles and expectations across the district.

How will you work to improve special education and the treatment of children with special needs in the district, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I will work to ensure that the special education department has the tools and budget that it needs to serve our special needs students. Currently, this department is understaffed and could use additional resources so I intend to continue to advocate that we fully fund the special education department.

How do you plan to prioritize transparency and communication for parents, students, educators, and the general public about issues affecting the Jersey City Public Schools?

As a co-chair of the parent committee myself and my colleague Gina Verdibello regularly host meetings around community relations clarifying any questions parents or the community has so we intend to continue to offer this method of communication in an effort to be transparent.

Candidate Name: Asheenia Johnson
Ballot Position: 4I
Slate (if applicable): Change for Children



Why are you running for the Jersey City Board of Education? Why do you think you are qualified to serve?

My passion is service. I grew up knowing the importance of community and giving back. I also know the importance of education in fulfilling the dreams of Jersey City's children. I was the first generation in my family to get a college degree. I was put on that path by an excellent education system and dedicated teachers. That is why I have been so disappointed in the current leadership of the Jersey City Board of Education. Their lack of leadership has put educating our children in jeopardy. From not planning for state aid cuts, which we all know were coming, to not being prepared for any emergency, let alone this pandemic, this board goes from crisis to crisis without solving any of them. *[Answer shortened]*

What are your priorities in regard to supporting students and families during the current COVID-19 pandemic?

- Making sure school buildings are getting the upgrades they need and the cleaning and disinfection protocols in place that parents, students and teachers need to open safely.
- Getting families and students help for their online learning
- Truthful communication with parents on COVID to rebuild trust that the district will make the right choices for families education and health

The Jersey City Public Schools are facing a worsening fiscal crisis amidst a nationwide economic crisis. JCPS are historically underfunded by more than \$100 million and expect continued losses of state funding over the coming years. What are your plans to alleviate this crisis and ensure that our schools are adequately funded going forward?

- The Change For Children budget plan aims to fully fund schools while maintaining transparency and accountability to all taxpayers. We will do this by cutting waste and corruption, and implementing a long-term strategic plan, one that looks five and ten years into the future. One of the main pillars of the long-term strategic plan will be equity in education excellence, and moving forward every budget item will be pegged to the strategic plan to ensure we are spending intelligently and strategically and in furtherance of the strategic plan.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the district (other than funding or COVID-19) and how would you address these issues during your term?

- Quality education for all students -- We need to equalize funding and teacher experience between schools, hire more tutors and have more after school learning programs for students that need the help. We need to make better use of technology and training to ensure all students can experience the best in education opportunities. It also means that every student and every household must have and be wired for needed technology. If families cannot afford them, we must provide the technology necessary. This isn't an option. We must do this if all our families and students and our city are going to thrive.

How will you work to improve special education and the treatment of children with special needs in the district, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Special needs children are the most hurt by on-line education. We should have prioritized much earlier to get them the help they need and get them back to in-person education. It is disappointing that did not happen and almost criminal that is still not happening. The current district's one-size fits all pandemic response is not what Change for Children would have done. We would have prioritized students and learning based on education science, not convenience. I urge the current board to re-focus their response to the pandemic to prioritize getting help to those that need it most first.

How do you plan to prioritize transparency and communication for parents, students, educators, and the general public about issues affecting the Jersey City Public Schools?

- Making the school district website more informative and easier to use.
- Making sure the most important information is up front on the page
- Bringing parents in on our strategic planning so they have a bigger stake in our success

Candidate Name: Sonia N Cintron
Ballot Position: 5l
Slate (if applicable): Change for Children



Why are you running for the Jersey City Board of Education? Why do you think you are qualified to serve?

I grew up in Jersey City and educated by the best teachers in the Jersey City Public School district. I thrived in education as well as in sports growing up on Montgomery Street, Ward C. Feeling the safety and support of a caring community, I understand the importance of excelling in the face of adversity. For those who do not speak English as their first language, I know it can be challenging and with a good education it is important for making better choices in the lives of our children, and that is why I became a substitute teacher. *[Answer shortened]*

What are your priorities in regard to supporting students and families during the current COVID-19 pandemic?

- Getting tutors to students at risk of falling further behind, especially non-english speakers
- Giving parents and caregivers training on remote learning to ensure all students are getting the most out of their remote education
- Making sure all families have the internet connections and computers they need to ensure a quality education

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- Many of the current JCPS budget issues are caused by wasteful and corrupt spending practices. If elected, I will take immediate measures to cut unnecessary administrative costs to put the money back into classrooms where it belongs. This includes cutting spending on overpriced outside consultants, stemming corruption and backroom deals, overhauling bid practices to ensure we get the most for our money, and embracing technology to increase efficiency.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the district (other than funding or COVID-19) and how would you address these issues during your term?

- Encourage more parent involvement in our children's education -- All of the science shows that greater parent involvement means better education. To promote and encourage involvement, we have get parents trained as well as teachers on best practises of learning and hire tutors to provide in-home help to both students and parents. We have to initiate a program of having teachers visit the homes of their students before the school year to talk to parents and understand in-home situations and make better use of community centers to provide parents, teachers, students a place to come together off-campus to encourage dialogue and interest.

How will you work to improve special education and the treatment of children with special needs in the district, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- This is a big issue with all special needs children, but it is especially important among families that struggle financially and who don't speak english as their first language. We need to get special needs students back to in-person education as quickly as possible. That means making priorities, which the current board has not done. It also means that until they can get back to school, we need to get parents of special needs students trained on the best uses of technology. We also need better communication to parents about programs to help families of special needs students.

How do you plan to prioritize transparency and communication for parents, students, educators, and the general public about issues affecting the Jersey City Public Schools?

- Having school board meetings in every community so more parents can participate
- Have open office hours in community centers and libraries to give parents better access
- Be open and honest about issues concerning our schools and students to build back trust in the board

Candidate Name: Karen Poliski
Ballot Position: 6I
Slate (if applicable): Change for Children



Why are you running for the Jersey City Board of Education? Why do you think you are qualified to serve?

- I grew up here and always strived to do my part to make the city better. That is why I decided to run for Jersey City Board of Education. I know the importance of a good education to students, families, our community and local businesses, but was frustrated with a school board that seemed rudderless, wasted money, was corrupt, and most importantly was wasting children's opportunities to succeed. As someone who has owned their own business, I know that you can't spend more than you bring in and you must be up on the latest trends or you will fail. *[Answer shortened]*

What are your priorities in regard to supporting students and families during the current COVID-19 pandemic?

- Getting help to working families who struggle between providing food and being available at home for their children's education
- Giving more training to teachers on remote learning to ensure a quality education
- Build back trust that the district will make the right decisions by using science as a guide and bringing in families now to plan for a new education paradigm ushered in by this pandemic.

The Jersey City Public Schools are facing a worsening fiscal crisis amidst a nationwide economic crisis. JCPS are historically underfunded by more than \$100 million and expect continued losses of state funding over the coming years. What are your plans to alleviate this crisis and ensure that our schools are adequately funded going forward?

- The current Board has a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive - we have watched them time and time again careen from crisis to crisis with no comprehensive long-term plan or strategy. This approach is unfortunately reflected in the budget and is the cause of many of the JCPS budget issues. The Change For Children team is committed to implementing a long-term strategic plan, one developed with substantial community input and involvement so that Jersey City taxpayers know exactly how and why their money is being spent, and how it will make our schools better. *[Answer shortened]*

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the district (other than funding or COVID-19) and how would you address these issues during your term?

- Embrace a new education paradigm that will make better use of technology and new learning opportunities -- We have known for years the promise of technology in education. We also know that technology will never replace in-person education. However, the fact that we were not prepared for remote learning in this pandemic shows the lack of foresight of the board. Now we need to make up for lost time and begin planning, training, and communicating with parents how the Jersey City school system is going to make use of this opportunity. We need to make sure all families have the technologies necessary to welcome this new paradigm; *[Answer shortened]*

How will you work to improve special education and the treatment of children with special needs in the district, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- This is an issue about which I care deeply. Special needs students have been hurt especially hard during this pandemic. It seems the current board has not understood that. They haven't looked at the science and data about who is being hurt most by our schools being closed. Special needs and K-5th grade students are also hurt most by not having in-person education. We needed to prioritize our response. They didn't. I will. I will work with education and special needs experts to ensure our most vulnerable get the help and support they need. That means getting more tutors with experience in students with special needs and more training for teachers.

How do you plan to prioritize transparency and communication for parents, students, educators, and the general public about issues affecting the Jersey City Public Schools?

- Bring parents, students, educators, and businesses into our strategic planning process early and take their input seriously to ensure they are bought into our vision for educating our children.
- Hold open forums in community centers to answer questions and give information to parents where they live.
- I've learned a lot and met really good people going door-to-door in this campaign and I pledge, if elected, to continue to meet parents and taxpayers at their door so I can hear directly from them and be accountable to them.