

IT'S ALL ABOUT PRIORITIES

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Priorities are going to be more critical than ever for our schools, as all school board candidates have acknowledged the difficult economic conditions we're facing. It's essential that residents know the candidates' positions and the tradeoffs they're likely to make if elected. The context I use below to evaluate their priorities is based in research showing that when it comes to educational excellence, teacher quality, class size and a challenging curriculum matter most. As a resident who has voted on both sides of party lines – and who believes school board elections should not be partisan – I'd prefer to avoid even referring to the candidates as the 'Republicans' and 'Democrats,' yet the reality is that each group is affiliated with a party so I'll use those labels. So what is each slate focused on in the face of our estimated \$3 million deficit?

From what I've seen in mentions of specific policy positions, the Republican slate is against the Keystone Exams and in favor of full-day Kindergarten (assuming it is 'budget-neutral'), addressing parking & traffic issues at the high school and moving high school start times later in the day to address adolescent sleep problems. Since both slates have the exact same position on the Keystone Exams (a waste of our taxpayer money), that point isn't relevant as a comparison.

Full-day Kindergarten is a great concept, and as a resident with a child who will soon be entering Kindergarten I love the theory. Unfortunately, after checking with district insiders and school board members from neighboring districts who have studied the issue, it's clear that 'budget-neutrality' is not realistic. Going from half-day to full day requires more staff and there are physical space issues. The Republican slate implies it isn't a priority if it requires more money, and I agree in the above context of what drives educational excellence and the tough trade-offs we'll be making. The Democrats also support full-day Kindergarten, but do not believe there's funding. This item therefore isn't meaningful as a campaign position.

Parking and traffic issues at the high school don't fare much better. It's an annoyance, but not a core priority for maintaining excellence in schools at the current critical juncture. Those close to this issue agree the situation isn't ideal, but that hiring expensive consultants and construction are not priorities in the current budget environment.

That leaves the Republican position on high school start times. This issue has merit, as high school kids need more sleep. As the candidates acknowledge, though, it's logistically complex, requiring changes in extracurricular activity scheduling that may not be possible. Neighboring districts that investigated shifting start times decided required changes can't be implemented. I support the investigation, but question its feasibility and priority relative to issues directly impacting teacher quality, class size and curriculum.

The democratic school board candidates have based their agenda on the issues of a line-by-line examination of spending, instituting a curriculum audit, maintaining class size and increasing transparency of decisions. They've also proposed creative ideas to save money, such as refinancing school debt and pooling resources with neighboring districts that I don't have the ability to evaluate. Let's look at each of their priorities starting with transparency, as you might question how transparency is relevant in the context of our current economic conditions. The reality is that significant tax dollars have been wasted due to decisions that happened without public scrutiny, from the squandering of six-figure amounts by a former township manager to the six-figure sum drained by ex-superintendent Cooper's extravagant spending on items including consultants who happened to be his old friends. Decisions made with transparency don't allow waste we can no longer afford.

Class size is essential to a quality education, allowing good teachers to give students the time and attention they need to develop. Small classes enable quality instruction, enriching interactions and support when needed. Large class sizes are a primary factor making schools – and therefore neighborhoods – less desirable, and a reason people choose to send their kids to private schools. It's just that important. It's also an immediate and real problem, as there's not only talk of making elementary classes larger, but high school administrators have been advised that classes with fewer than 20 kids may not run. This number was 15 last year and 12 in the past, and increasing it threatens the curriculum diversity that supports our community's needs. When the budget forces tradeoffs, we need a board that stands firm to protect class size if we want to protect the Radnor's reputation. I'd specifically recognize Lydia Solomon here, who worked with the administration to retain a 21 student limit in 3rd grade classes and who has made simple yet creative proposals such as offering valuable but lower enrollment courses every other year instead of cancelling them.

The curriculum audit and a line-by-line examination of spending go hand in hand as essential and specific actions we have to take to ensure fiscal discipline and the highest impact for our tax dollars. There hasn't been a curriculum audit in a generation. Every healthy organization must reflect on whether its resources are allocated in ways that create the most benefit and where it can eliminate wasteful spending. Not only have we lacked review of what's being taught, how, and areas for improvement, but we haven't asked tough questions about potential tradeoffs that merit consideration, such as teaching languages (as our neighboring districts do) at the younger ages at which, all reputable experts agree, kids can best become bilingual.

Between the two slates, it is clear to me that the Democrats - Rob Armstrong, Lydia Solomon, Doug Blazey and Brucie Rapoport – have priorities that make a lot more sense. They have my vote, and it has everything to do with priorities. All school board candidates from both parties have acknowledged how critical our schools are to our community. The Democrats, though, have a much better handle on the important issues, which gives me confidence in the trade-offs they'll make in challenging economic times.

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