

# OPINIONS & VIEWS

## The Federation Corner



### School Board

#### Candidate Review

*The viewpoints expressed may not necessarily be those adopted by the Federation. Any resident who would like to contribute to this column should contact Federation Delegate Alyce Ortuzar at 301-774-6617.*

#### Civic Federation Sponsors Board of Education Candidate Forum

Over the years, Montgomery County Schools have become overcrowded, surrounded by trailers euphemistically called portable classrooms, while empty schools became inaccessible due to political sweetheart deals made without community input and approval. Waiting lists for programs such as language immersion have been further displaced with some sort of a lottery system despite opposition from parents, rather than expanding the availability of these programs.

Disparities of resources and spending between regular and magnet programs have increased, including the lack of textbooks in regular classes, and some magnet programs look like elite, racially-segregated private schools within the public school system. And despite research documenting the importance of art, music, drama and foreign languages taught at a very early age—they translate to higher order cognitive skills especially in science and math, and also enhance emotional and social development—these opportunities, whether part of the school day or in after school programs, have been consistently treated as superfluous to our children's needs. They are some of the first areas eliminated when budgets need to be trimmed, and have been increasingly replaced with costly, one-size-fits-all standardized testing, despite the absence of outcome data supporting these tests.

Other complaints include an enormous amount of money spent by the school system on lawyers (hundreds of thousands of dollars according to the Board of Education's Web site), often as a way to thwart requests for services from parents. In one case, the school system spent far more on legal fees than the \$16,000 the parents were requesting for a special teacher and an after-school program that had dramatically helped their child, following five years of consistent failure and deterioration in every program the school system had placed the child.

There are also complaints about the amount of money spent on teacher training (which prestigious private schools in the county do not feel the need to provide), and concerns about teacher competency, such as a science teacher who does not know what a wetland is, and an incompetent chemistry teacher with a questionable attendance and arriving at class on-time record.

It is in this context that Montgomery County residents should feel heartened by the excellent choices they have among the candidates running for the Board of Education. This column will summarize responses from the candidates to questions posed by those attending the Civic Fed forum. More complete candidate statements and biographical sketches are posted on the Civic Fed's website ([www.montgomerycivic.org](http://www.montgomerycivic.org)) and on the candidates' websites. The election takes place on March 2, 2004. Unlike the County Council election, the Board of Ed elections are nonpartisan, and every voter in the County has one choice in each category that is on the ballot: at-large, and Districts 2 and 4.

Current Board members up for re-election are At-Large Candidate Sharon Cox, and District 2 Candidate Walter Lange. Challenging Cox are Michael Anthony Enriquez Ibanez, and Tommy Le. Challenging Lange are former Board of Education Member Stephen Abrams, and Bob Astrove. Vying for District 2 are Valerie Ervin and Sheldon Fishman. Additional names will appear on the ballot, but those candidates have since withdrawn from the election.

Current School Board Member Sharon Cox

Cox characterizes charter schools as "a laboratory and opportunity for new approaches that the rest of the school system can learn from at a lower cost," and supports current policy mandating that all teachers hold a degree in education in order to be credentialed. She sees charter schools as serving a particular population, such as kids who have fallen behind in high school, and as a last chance for fifth-year seniors to succeed in an unstigmatized setting and graduate.

#### Current School Board Member Sharon Cox

She takes credit for improved standards that have resulted in student achievement and more accountability. Cox does not feel she should take a position on issues of growth in the county other than current mandates governing adequate public facilities and school capacity. She came under criticism for supporting a lottery for placement in language immersion programs, despite displacing families already on a waiting list. Her website is [www.sharoncox.org](http://www.sharoncox.org).

Michael Anthony Enriquez Ibanez

Ibanez profusely praised Superintendent Weist's reforms, and then criticized him for "dropping the ball on the curriculum." Ibanez has experience as a teacher and a principal. He supports more out-sourcing, a temporary increase in the sales tax dedicated to the construction and renovation of schools, and closer ties between businesses and corporations and schools. Differential teaching is good. He noted the economic inequities from school to school and poor oversight system-wide resulting in gaps and failure rates. He wants more magnet programs, charter schools and signature programs that are "riskier and bolder." Language immersion programs should be expanded. He supports starting school after Labor Day. He does not list a website.

#### Michael Anthony Enriquez Ibanez

Tommy Le

Le said schools need to function as a village of support for the students and their families, with more input from families and the surrounding community. He supports more "family friendly" scheduling, especially school starting dates. Policies should be bottom up, not top down (i.e. originating with and dictated by the superintendent). He has a PhD in engineering, taught at Montgomery College and understands academic rigor, and also has a strong background in vocational/career and technological education. He wants to provide more critical oversight of the school operational budgets and activities to insure that they are in the best interests of the students and not necessarily of the administrators. "The school board should listen to the parents." He also criticized funding inequities among schools, and questioned why more teachers training does not take place during the summer. He also stated that "A closed school is not useful to anyone." His website is [www.tommyle4boe.org](http://www.tommyle4boe.org)

#### Tommy Le

Current School Board Member Walter Lange

Lange is a former President of the Montgomery County Council of Parent and Teachers Association (PTA). He stressed building teacher competence, and that the new Annual Growth Policy recently adopted by the County Council (which includes lifting building moratoriums throughout the county), has strong provisions for school capacity. He sees the "endless possibilities education offers," and stated that "we do listen to the community." He stressed tying the budget to strategic planning and collaboration with families and the community. Health and safety issues are his top priorities. He opposes single district voting, and thinks the system as it is serves the public.

Former Board of Education Member Stephen Abrams

Abrams pointed out how much Montgomery County schools are the envy of other communities. He was on the School Board when they hired Superintendent Weist and is proud of that and of the job Weist is doing raising student outcomes. Abrams noted that Bush's Leave No Child Behind has many hidden costs, in addition to costs of complying with other state and federal requirements that Montgomery County cannot provide.

#### Current School Board Member Walter Lange

He stressed revising the curricula to reflect clear and consistent expectations. Regarding changing the starting date to after Labor Day, he noted competing needs of transportation versus classroom funding.

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#### Former Board of Education Member Stephen Abrams

He stated that the adequate public facilities ordinances have not been adhered to, and blamed state regulations for restricting the size of a school. He commented on the role magnet programs were to play to integrate the schools and improve parental and community involvement, and wants more magnet programs with more fluidity between them and regular classes, offering more opportunities for more students. He suggested relying more on existing county bus systems in addition to school buses to reduce transportation costs.

He said focusing on learning gaps is a mistake; we should focus on raising the level of achievement of each child to the highest standard backed by the needed resources. He criticized gross inconsistencies in the meaning of letter grades system-wide. He is particularly supportive of the International Baccalaureate Program. He does not list a Web site.

Bob Astrove

Astrove has a Master's Degree in Business Administration. He has focused on school priorities and understanding the school operating budget. He is critical of the stifling effect the "test score of the week syndrome" has on teacher creativity. He supports a more decentralized system for better fiscal management and classroom flexibility. He wants a strong school preservation and maintenance program and technology to improve building efficiency. He wants more curricula choices and options, including for the special education population. He also supports more language immersion programs; students should be bilingual. He criticized the lack of initiative and creativity because of a highly scripted test-oriented posture in the system. His website is [www.astrove.org](http://www.astrove.org).

#### Bob Astrove

Valerie Ervin

Ervin has served on the Blair High School PTA and with efforts such as Blacks United for Excellence in Education. She is a labor educator and currently serves as Chief of Staff to County Councilman Levantahl. She says she understands how uncontrolled growth creates new demands on county resources and diverts resources from the needs of current residents. She also says that everyone needs trees and high-quality natural resources, and all children need advocates on the Board of Education. She believes that every child is entitled to an equal opportunity, and every teacher should convey a love of learning. It is important to institutionalize a sense of high expectations for every child. She criticized "high-stakes testing," and wants teachers to have the time to teach. She noted the difficulty in reducing transportation costs in trying to start school after Labor Day. Her website is [www.valerie4boe.org](http://www.valerie4boe.org)

#### Valerie Ervin

Sheldon Fishman

Fishman has Master's Degrees in mechanical engineering and biostatistics, and has held positions in various PTAs. Music, he said, is valuable to a student for learning math. He said that in order for children to learn math, give a child a violin, not a calculator. He wants greater School Board transparency and accountability, and sees a need to improve the Board's analytical ability regarding programs and outcomes. How has the school system spent 1.6 billion dollars, he asked. He wants to empower parents, and supports early intervention (not months or years after a child falls behind). He argues that the state MISAP tests were geared to close the gap of things all kids can do, but did not represent education. Test alignment has replaced pedagogy.

#### Sheldon Fishman

He talked about school Integrated Pest Management and recycling programs as ways to model positive behaviors. He also supports single district voting. His website is [www.sheldonfishman.com](http://www.sheldonfishman.com).

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