

Village at Ithaca
Board of Education Candidates Forum 2008
Written Responses to Questions

Candidates were asked to respond to all five questions. Those who were able to meet the submission requirements are listed here. There was no minimum or maximum word limit imposed – candidates were instructed to write as little or as much as they needed to make their position clear to the community. Their responses are presented here in reverse alphabetical order by last name, as we did last year. Responses have not been edited at all, but the fonts and type size have been made consistent.

1) What is your definition of equity, as it applies to education?

Scott Perez

Equity means that every student gets the best possible education. Every student has the right to an education that is geared to his/her needs and learning style. Every student's goals and dreams must be respected. Every student has the right to learn in an atmosphere that is free from fear or intimidation. This district does a good job of educating the majority of the students. While keeping that in place, we must find solutions to ensure that we also do a very good job of educating all students. Race, class, and disability are usually cited as the major predictors of lack of academic success, and the district is taking some steps to address them. But, I believe that we must look deeper. There are others that are failing in this system. What other factors might be involved? Is there some systemic issue in the district that could at least partially explain why these students fail? Until we take a long, hard look at this, and design a holistic program that integrates all of the parts, we will not have equity.

Reaching equity in the district requires a full partnership between the community and the district. Just as the school system will educate the next generation of citizens, and they in turn bring change to the community, the community can be a vital part of the process. Community input can inform decisions and programs. But this can only happen if we work to build bridges and to bring trust into the process. I have heard too often that people feel their opinions are not valued or ignored by the district, even when they have been sought out. The district must not only listen to the community, it must also hear. An effective school district isn't the same as an efficient corporation. The process must meet the needs of the students and the community. It cannot have a rigid system where the students have to fit in or fail, and the community has no input.

Seth Peacock

My definition of equity is focusing resources and programs where they are needed to address the particular educational needs of the students.

Mac Larsen

To me, the concept of equity means a broadly interpreted fairness for all. In education, I think of it as fairness of opportunity, which implies assistance to students in helping them succeed in activities they choose to pursue.

Allen Lambert

In a word - fairness. More concretely it implies that sometimes more than equal resources should be provided to help reduce the effects of historical, structural, and cultural disadvantages. That translates into more or specialized instructional materials; additional aides in classrooms and specialized classes and before- and after- school programs; recruitment and staff development; etc.

It is disappointing that this Village questionnaire is so narrow, focusing on only a single issue and ICSD goal when education is about a much bigger picture, starting with education as a whole and the official ICSD Mission statement. Most parents are interested in a good education, rather than only one of many mechanisms for achieving it. ICSD Mission statement:

“ Our MISSION is: to educate every student to become a life-long learner; to foster academic, social, emotional and physical development; to nurture an understanding and respect for all people in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic world; and to promote responsible citizenship in a democracy.”

Josh Bornstein

Our Board priority of eliminating race, class, and disability as predictors of school success genuinely says it well. I have rarely seen as succinct and useful a way to define educational equity. That priority does not guarantee equal outcomes, which some people confuse with equity. However, it does focus us on the process all the way along, to be certain that students: 1) have access to information they need to learn, 2) have the opportunity to show what they know and can do in the manner that is most effective for their style of learning, 3) are challenged to grow intellectually, and not assumed to have ceilings on their learning, 4) are valued for the lives they lead outside of school, rather than excused, blamed, or presumed to be handicapped by them and 5) are taught restorative justice when resolving conflicts.

Achieving that equity is hard work, but it is not mysterious work. We know how to do it. Our community now requires the leadership to be sure that we examine our practices and policies rigorously with that priority as the guide.

2) What life or professional experiences – both successes and challenges – do you have addressing equity issues?

Scott Perez

I have the personal experience of dealing with equity issues here in Ithaca on several fronts. My son is 10 and has Down Syndrome. The battle to get the services that he needs, and deserves, has been a long process. It is a constant factor in our family life. And we have made progress. We are also involved with a group of other parents of children with special needs. All have their stories to tell.

As a part of the American Indian Program at Cornell, I have listened as young Native college students tell me about facing racism or bias in the community or on the campus. Quite often, just

talking them through it, and letting them know that they need to somehow depersonalize it is all that I can do. When they reach the understanding that bias often comes from fear and ignorance, rather than pure hatred, it gives them more tools to handle situations as they arise. I have dealt with the same kinds of issues in Native communities where I have lived and worked.

I also know from first hand experience all of the colorful terms you can hear from having a Spanish surname. In those days, there were neighborhoods where my family could not own a house. I have been involved in immigrant and farm workers rights throughout my adult life.

Living in the West and working as a cowboy, I became very aware of a different kind of equity issue; that of power and money. I have seen people forced from their land and homes when wealthy people come into an area and start buying up properties until the tax load becomes unbearable to the remaining people and they are forced to sell. I have also seen where well-meaning people try to force people to give up their livelihoods in the name of environmentalism. In many cases, this is not only unnecessary but counterproductive. I spent many years working with the holistic land movement. By getting ranchers, cowboys, land managers, and environmentalists together to seek common ground we have been able to not only protect the land and people's way of life, but we have actually used livestock grazing and logging to restore already badly degrade lands. This period of my life is what has convinced me that there is no problem that we cannot overcome. We must work together, find the common ground, and move forward from there. The Haudenosaunee call this the power of "The Good Mind."

Seth Peacock

In my professional life, as an attorney in the criminal justice system, I have tried to address equity issues by providing the best possible representation to fight against the tendency for the system to disproportionally focus on the infractions of poor and minority citizens. While on the board I have consistently advocated for those students who have not been well served by the district.

Mac Larsen

There are many for I have lived a long life.

1950: As a result of writing a term paper for a graduate course in Educational Sociology at Stanford, I became acquainted with the Congress of Racial Equality, and their nonviolent direct action work, first to integrate eating places in Chicago. This was also the group which began the freedom rides on interstate bus lines into the south, ultimately forcing the abandonment of restricted seating for black riders.

1962: As a member of the board of directors for the Palo Alto Co-op near Stanford, I grew concerned about the absence of black people on our staff, and tried to get the Board to agree on reaching out to open this opportunity to blacks. Unfortunately, the General Manager took this as a criticism, and pointed out that he had a union shop and simply asked the union to send qualified employees. When that objection blocked my hope I was not happy, and showed my concern by resigning. Some years later, serving again on the board, I wrote and the Board adopted an Affirmative Action plan. Which not only added black employees but also provided for women to move up to leadership positions such as controller.

1968: I was living in Washington, DC on leave from San Jose State University and working for the AAUP. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preparations for the Poor Peoples Campaign were completed under the leadership of Rev. Ralph Abernathy. This was an extended campaign, with the Washington Mall being used to set up “Resurrection City”, consisting of huts formed from three sheets of plywood. When heavy rains turned parts of the mall into a sea of mud, my wife and I responded to the need for emergency housing by having a total of 21 black people stay at our home, thus giving support for people seeking a vital equity in their lives.

1970 - 1983: I was a strong supporter of the of the United Farmworkers in their work for improving working conditions. I prepared a special report for the Palo Alto Co-op which led to support for the grape and lettuce boycotts and visited the Forty Acres headquarters of the UFW and later the Lapaz headquarters, both helping a bit and learning much. My two daughters have worked closely with Cesar Chavez and other UFW leaders.

2001-2003: As a member of the Indian Affairs Committee of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers) I learned much about what we have done to Native Americans. This is still a deep concern of mine, and I will be working on the Friends Committee on National Legislation in their “Honor the Promises” campaign to improve the lives of the first Americans.

2008: I led the local campaign to raise funds for UNICEF’s work on sanitation and clean water for the vast number of people in the world who currently have no access to safe water; we raised enough for UNICEF to provide 86,000 days of clean water for vulnerable children. What does this have to do with equity? The answer is equity for women and girls, who are the main water carriers in many parts of the world, often having to make day long journeys to get even polluted water and preventing any chance of gaining an education. UNICEF not only provides clean water but does so in places as close as possible to the villages, enabling girls to go to school.

Allen Lambert

Categories which could be discussed at length are Family and Personal History of discrimination, Understanding, Academic study, and Practical involvements. Some of my family history is for a different setting. And some of my involvements are not for public promotion because they are private charitable or religious service activities (but they are extensive in Ithaca, Arkansas, Utah, and the Sudan).

I will say that my proactive involvement goes back to 1959 when I helped integrate a major college athletic program with several kinds of efforts and became the roommate to the first black and brown football players at the school. In terms of ICSD, I was the first to ask for data on minority staff retention (back in 1993), initiated the review of Affirmative Action Policy (1993), argued to save the AA Policy clause requiring BoE direct involvement in approving procedures (1994 and again recently [won the first one, lost this current one]), initiated the effort to create an independent Multicultural Education policy and served on the committee which wrote it. I also taught Multicultural Education courses at SUNY Albany.

Mormon history. Maternal grandfather. UU. WU, student radicalism, and writing on student movements. CURW and ACT. In ICSD - AA policy. Retention numbers. MCE policy. Arkansas.

Josh Bornstein

As a teacher, I was lucky to work with creative, dedicated colleagues, and together we achieved the results in one classroom that we want now to see across the district. We did it by knowing our students' learning styles and needs very well, by organizing our teaching into small focused groups with low teacher-student ratios, and by being sure that skill instruction was balanced and integrated with higher level thinking. Our school administration supported that work with reasonable class sizes, and common planning times. (Often, we made the time ourselves because the work required more of us. Teachers go above and beyond this way in Ithaca all the time.) I can not say that every year I was so successful. However, I can say that over the years I my colleagues and I used teaching methods that research now tells us are effective ways to achieve educational equity.

As a principal, I led a school to shift their discipline program from emphasizing punishment to focusing on teaching children to be people of good character. We moved from strictly keeping order to teaching justice. In that same capacity as principal, I was beginning to work with our faculty to align our curriculum so that we could do a more effective job serving children with disabilities in particular. I was only able to begin that work, and can not say that we had made great strides yet during my tenure. However, in one school I was successful at creating that common planning time that I had enjoyed myself as a teacher. (My other school was fortunately already set up to do that.)

As a member and leader in the Ithaca Teachers Association, I was involved with setting and motivating our negotiating agenda at contract time. I am particularly proud that this was the contract that won benefits for domestic partners.

While work has been my primary vehicle for advancing equity, it is not the only one. Before teaching, I was a community organizer in peace and justice work. Most recently, I have been involved in the Obama for President campaign. As an organizer and volunteer, I am most proud of the work I have done on expanding the participation of underserved communities, especially through voter registration and get-out-the-vote work.

3) What would you say to those people who believe that implementing the Equity goal will negatively impact students who are already high achievers?

Scott Perez

This question plays to one of my strengths. Over the years I have mediated, formally and informally, in disputes or discussions between individuals, communities, or interest groups. My Master's and Doctoral work have focused on building bridges and strengthening ties between people with different cultural backgrounds and different perspectives on the world.

I will explain that I want to redefine and broaden the term "equity." Equity means for everyone. It must be made clear that this is not an "us versus them" issue. No one loses in equity. This message must be spread widely, a process that has already started. I think the radio ads are effective. This process also needs to take place through EILC, or whatever group is set up for effective interactions between groups in the district. This broadening and education process also must happen on an individual level. We need to be clear and focused in our face-to-face meetings with parents. Communication is the key.

I will explain that we must rework the budget process. The budget as it stands now is overly complex and disjointed. We must look closely at how money is being spent. The process for next year's budget needs to start this summer. We need to look to other communities and districts that have found solutions for, or have drawn close to solving, some of the issues we face. We need to create programs that are effective at multiple levels. I will also assure them that I consider the arts and sports to be an important part of a well rounded education. The budget and programs need to be pro-active, not reactive. And we need to look at the budget from the perspective of the redefined equity. How do we serve all of our children? How do we take the actions needed for specific groups and truly integrate them into a holistic system? We have the knowledge and the talent within the district and the greater community to do all of this.

Seth Peacock

A small minority in our community will never accept that the equity goals will not take away from their children, however most people support the equity goals. If fellow board members are afraid of the equity goals it will require frank dialogue, education and negotiation. For teachers and those responsible for implementing the equity goals, it is more critical that they support and accept the equity goals. District and school leadership must effectively address teacher attitudes and concerns to bring them into the process so that they fully support the goals. In the end, I believe that it is a false choice between implementing equity goals or harming successful students. The same skills used to enhance the educational experience of struggling student will also benefit our successful students.

Mac Larsen

I would say that we all rise when we improve opportunity for others, as Henry Ford knew when he increased the wages for his workers so they could buy some of the cars they made.

Allen Lambert

There is not a simple yes/no answer. It depends on how each is implemented. So "the devil is in the details". One common potential conflict is in the competition for funding. The demand ("wants") for all programs always exceeds available supply of money. Sometimes funding for a particular position or program in one or the other area gets limited by need for some in another area. Thus, to give an hypothetical, ICSD might be able to fund one position but not two, so it could become a forced choice between a minority recruitment specialist and an honors science specialist. In such situations, the BoE as a whole (through majority vote) decides which is higher priority and to what extent (how much tax money to allocate).

Josh Bornstein

Equity in education is like universal design in the rest of life. On the street, curb cuts are easier for everyone to get up. In the classroom, we now know that teaching techniques that work for students at risk are actually good techniques for all. For example, we have used the different modes of learning—visual, auditory, interpersonal, and others—as ways of giving each student the opportunity to show what they know in the way that is most accessible to them. Recent research shows that these techniques go beyond even that kind of fairness. Whenever a learner approaches a concept in several modes, not just one, the connections in the brain become stronger, more robust. Therefore, every student benefits from working with teachers who are capable in multiple-intelligence instruction.

4) How would community involvement be part of your Board of Education decisions?

Scott Perez

Community involvement and input will be absolutely essential to my decision making as a board member. Not only will I seek input for issues that I know will come up and I have time to plan for, but I will contact and meet with community reps that I know or know of early in my term and also ask advice on others to contact early in my term. By doing this and starting the dialogue, I will have a better idea of community positions on basic issues so that when a decision has to be made on short notice, it will be an informed decision on my part. I will make use of email and the telephone to remain in contact, float ideas, and ask specific questions. I will also remain flexible. Sometimes even the most informed decision can have unintended consequences. It is important to monitor results of a decision or program and be ready to take corrective action if and when needed. One thing I feel happens too often here is that a plan is enacted and then it just goes on and on even when there are negative or minimal results. In these cases, the community (and I am including teachers, aides, and students) will often be aware of what is working and what isn't.

I will keep an open line and an open mind. When someone from the community contacts me, I will respond and ask questions. I promise that my response will not be, "Sorry, that's not my job." While I have no intention, nor time, nor inclination to micro-manage the district, I will pass on an issue or concern and expect that it will be addressed. Administrators are to put plans into action and solve problems, not sweep things under the rug until the rug tears open. I will protect confidentiality and work to gain the trust of all parts of the community.

Seth Peacock

As I have done during my time on the board I would encourage community input, reach out to the community and look for opportunities to have community members make presentations directly to the board and administration.

Mac Larsen

I have important ideas for additional involvement of community in essential work for decreasing the racial, class and other tensions in our community and schools. And the already heavy involvement of volunteers in equity work is one of the strongest reasons I have for supporting that work.

Allen Lambert

No one has been stronger or more consistent than I in trying to increase citizen and parent involvement in District and BoE operations and decision making. I have actively sought to broaden input and to assure the presence of dissenting views, values, and voices; and not just presence, but strong articulation and vigorous debate.

I created informal citizen discussion groups to consider issues. I produced and sponsored “Education in Ithaca” for two years on public access TV. I helped create the original Site Council plan. I have encouraged more public participation on District and Board ad hoc committees. I have expended much effort to expand participation in elections and in other ICSD advisory and decision making councils at school levels.

Josh Bornstein

Our community has a number of strong historic institutions which deserve access to education decision-makers, though they have not always had that access. Our historic churches and community organizations are those places. I will ask the leaders of several of these organizations—such as Southside Community Center, the Tompkins County Workers Center, and our hosts tonight—for a place in their regular membership meetings for dialogue.

But this can be taken further than just me. Currently, the Board has formal liaison relationships with the schools. I will ask the Board to consider adding at least one community organization to each Board member’s responsibilities as liaison.

Finally, I will take on responsibility for increasing the public voice at many levels in the school system. There are numerous policy and personnel committees of the ICSD that have spots for parents and community members. I will initiate a recruitment and training program for parents and community members so that they can effectively speak for themselves in those venues.

5) How will you ensure that the ICSD budget is aligned with the district’s stated goal “to eliminate race, class, and disability as predictors of student success”?

Scott Perez

As I have stated, I want to have a thorough accounting of the budget as it stands now. And the budget process in the future needs to change. The first step is to have a clear vision of what the budget is to ultimately accomplish. The primary goal is to provide the best possible education for all of the children in the district. Are the programs put in place working to meet this goal? Are the individual programs working with each other or at cross-purposes? We can be creative in coming up with programs that meet the needs of multiple groups. We need to take the lead in setting policies and programs that will ensure equity, cut redundancy, and respect the taxpayers’ interests. When programs and positions are initiated, there must be follow-up. We must be willing to monitor, and also to change or abandon those that are not working.

At the same time, the budget must be fair to the district employees. We have inequities that need to be addressed in this regard. We cannot eliminate these factors as predictors of student success entirely, unless we work at a community scale at the same time. While we need to provide

specific educational services that meet the needs of our diverse student population, we must also work to make sure that the actions of the district have a positive influence in the community. District employees must be treated with the same respect and fairness that we are asking them to provide the students. There is a ripple effect. When people are treated with dignity, they respond in kind.

Finally, I feel that we must put sustainability into the budget. We must look farther down the road. If we look out for long term benefits, rather than short term economic savings, we will better serve the community and have more resources in the long run to put into student programs.

Seth Peacock

No single board could ensure any action by the district, however; as an individual member I would support programs and actions that I believe support that goal and I would encourage my board colleagues to do the same.

Mac Larsen

As I indicated above, I will do my best to support the work of so many concerned people, to improve opportunities for ICSD students. But I am running out of time and will have to leave it at that.

Allen Lambert

That makes it sound like more than it is. First there is a Mission statement which is a policy. Then there are annual goals or priorities which change periodically. “Elimination of class, race, and disability ...” is but one of six current “priorities”. So let’s keep it in perspective.

The budget is supposed to be aligned with the Mission. Each of the six goals or “priorities” should be considered during that year (or years) for attention in terms of data analysis, policy review and revision, program evaluation, and budget development to assure a fair share of resources are targeted to the goal, and subsequent evaluation to determine effectiveness.

I actively subject each item to careful review for need, program effectiveness, efficiency of use of resources, balance with other needs, and so on. Each merits extra attention in budget development. I believe in experimentation, and “equity” efforts are worth trying, both old and new approaches. Like other areas, periodic review of effectiveness determines which efforts should continue to receive funding, or to increase or decrease, and what new things to try.

Josh Bornstein

I will begin by building support on the Board for treating this goal as a legitimate guide for our strategic planning, moving it beyond just a phrase we feel good about. Since administrators begin work on the budget in November, I will introduce a resolution in October that directs the administration to justify its budget proposals with explicit reference to that goal. I will work also with the Village to produce the equity report card in time to use it as a reference for budget deliberations from February to April. This way, the budget proposals can be read alongside the Village’s equity report card to judge how responsive the budget priorities are to equity priorities.