

Vote411 Voters' Mini-Guide

Fall 2021

North Allegheny School Director

This Voters' Mini-Guide is an excerpt of the online Vote411 Voters' Guide -- a project of the League of Women Voters. To see your entire ballot, visit Vote411.org.

The North Allegheny School District elects school board members "at large." Voters in the school district will have all 8 candidates on their ballots, and may vote for up to four (4) candidates.

North Allegheny School Directors are elected on behalf of the community to oversee the education of students in their jurisdiction. They serve as agents of the state legislature. They are responsible for curriculum and instruction management, all finances including development of annual budgets and levying of taxes and issuance of debt obligations when necessary; personnel; legal matters; management of facilities; and transportation of students as appropriate. Schools may include pre-K and career and technical schools. The school board consists of nine members who serve four-year terms of office without pay.

Term of office: 4 years

*All information in Vote411 Voters' Guides is submitted by the candidates and has not been edited or altered in any way. **The League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh** has made every effort to enlist the participation of each candidate running for these positions. Candidates who would like to submit or update their written answers should contact vote411@lwvpgh.org.*





Leslie Britton Dozier

Party: Dem

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: TogetherForNA@gmail.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://www.together4na.com>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TogetherForNA

District: North Allegheny

Education: Juris Doctor, Duquesne University School of Law; Master of Science – Public Policy and Management, Carnegie Mellon University Heinz School; Bachelor of Science – Economics, The Lincoln University (PA)

Qualifications for office: As a Director and Attorney with 20+ years of experience, I know how to build consensus, make decisions based on data, and balance the needs of multiple groups of stakeholders. With my experience serving on non-profit boards and various committees in the NA District, I am well positioned to serve.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: As we look forward to the full reopening of our schools, we will need to rely on the talented teachers and administrators in our schools to identify the needs of our students and implement solutions to address any deficiencies. In addition to the available assessment tools, we should seek the input of our students and parents through discussions and surveys. The focus should be on student wellness—academically, mentally, emotionally, and physically, including ensuring that the appropriate resources, tools, and appropriate classroom sizes are available to properly address the impact of the pandemic on our students’ educational experience.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: While anti-bullying policies are important and a start, social and racial justice issues require specific focus, approaches, and policies. As a participant in a North Allegheny schools Focus Group reviewing the current District policies, we identified the need to review, update, and revise existing policies. The effectiveness of these policies is best measured by those who have witnessed and lived these experiences. It is the role of the Board to set the tone and strategy for the District including ensuring equality for all students and addressing social and racial justice issues. In that light, the Board should also have appropriate training and implement board policies to in these areas.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: We are fortunate to have education options in this Commonwealth and I support having options to best meet the needs of our students. Pennsylvania’s current funding formula, however, is inequitable, and the current PA charter school reimbursement is flawed. The PA charter school reimbursement permits charters schools to be paid at a higher rate than the cost of services provided to its students. While it is important to provide education options, such options should be equitably funded based on the services that are needed and aligned with the costs of the services delivered. We need to ensure resources are equitably distributed to all public education options.



Paige Hardy

Party: Dem

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: TogetherForNA@gmail.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://www.together4na.com>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TogetherForNA

District: North Allegheny School District

Education: Bachelor of Arts, University of Colorado, Boulder; Master of Arts, University of Melbourne, Australia

Qualifications for office: I worked for 10 years as a public health data analyst and am currently a dedicated parent volunteer at Marshall Elementary. I would bring my professional background as well as my working knowledge of our schools to make data driven and student centered decisions while keeping tax payers in mind.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: As the second largest school district in the region, North Allegheny's students have always had an extensive variety of academic needs to meet, but COVID has brought unique challenges. For our elementary school learners, NA has a series of brief reading, grammar, and math assessments given to students in September, December, and May through aimswebPlus and Study Island. These assessments have by all accounts been very useful at indicating where each student is with their foundational skills, and NA uses this information to help students progress through age and grade appropriate educational benchmarks. I would propose exploring adapting something similar to our middle and high schools allowing us identify student needs quickly, and respond.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: This is an important issue for North Allegheny, with students and families calling for improvements to school climate. I would propose improving the program assessments currently used by NA, and making their results more transparent for the greater community. NA's school climate survey assesses its anti-bullying and inclusion initiatives, with incidents of alleged harassment and discrimination reported separately in its yearly diversity report. While both reports are shared widely through the community, details on question content and any change over time are not included. Knowing those sorts of details would help us all know where NA could make improvements in these important areas.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: While I believe families should be allowed to choose the school and learning setting they feel is best for their children, the current funding model in PA for charter and cyber-charter schools is very challenging for public school districts. North Allegheny alone has labored under charter school costs of \$1.5 - 2M each year for the past 5 years. NA's Cyber Academy has been our district's incredibly effective and popular effort to minimize that cost and meet student needs during the pandemic. Maintaining NACA in a fiscally responsible fashion offers NA it's best chance to face the charter school funding dilemma until things change at a state level.



Sylvana Bonner

Party: Dem

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: TogetherForNA@gmail.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://www.together4na.com>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TogetherForNA

District: North Allegheny School District

Education: Bachelor of Science - Psychology, Syracuse University; Master of Science - IT Project Management, Robert Morris University

Qualifications for office: As a corporate manager of a multi-million dollar program and a leader of a large team of professionals, I understand how to identify opportunity areas, drill down to root cause, and work with various stakeholders to identify effective solutions that maximize outcomes.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: Although the pandemic transition wasn't a smooth one at North Allegheny, I'm grateful that there were options offered to meet the needs of most families. We are grateful that our schools never closed, despite calls to re-open the schools. We are a large district with varying degrees of needs, and even with the options offered, some of our children have fallen behind. To identify gaps, I believe we need to heavily rely on the expertise of the superintendent and teachers to determine which kids have fallen behind and offer solutions to enrich these children to boost their confidence and prepare them to handle new lessons and challenges. I would shy away from standardized test, as they do not offer real time feedback to support student needs.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: Programs without accountability are not effective. Most organizations do a good job of meeting compliance on any given initiative, i.e. checking the box. Once policies are in place, it's important to continue review to ensure policies, expectations and guidance remain current as our community evolves. The next level is creating a true inclusive environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and heard, and then actually holding accountable those who violate the standards. Measuring effectiveness of anti-bullying programs is difficult to measure, however, we can create a review board consisting of diverse students, teachers, and administrators to address complaints and make recommendations for next steps.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: Offering different education options is good for students and parent. We all have different needs and having options gives us a better chance at success. Unfortunately, in Pennsylvania, funding for public and charter schools is not equitable, where Charter schools are funded at a higher rate than public schools. At play also is academic performance and auditing by the state. The rules aren't the same for public and charter schools. Because school options are funded by taxpayers, it is in our best interest to ensure all schools are funded and treated equitably based on the needs of the student body and the services being offered by the schools. At core is ensuring that our children's needs are being met and protecting academic performance.



Jon Parker

Party: Dem

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: TogetherForNA@gmail.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://www.Together4NA.com>

Facebook: www.Facebook.com/TogetherForNA

District: North Allegheny School District

Education: B.S. English Education, 2004; M.S. K-12 Education, 2011; Instructional II Teaching Certificate, 7-12 English

Qualifications for office: Pittsburgh Public Schools classroom teaching experience, 17 years; English Department Chair, Team Lead in various programs, 10 years; Allderdice High School Treasurer, 9 years; Youth Sports Volunteer Coach, 7 years

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: Time for actual teaching and learning is critical. As such, school districts should be strategic in selecting efficient assessments with immediately accessible data to identify what learning gaps exist. The fact is, state tests such as Keystones and PSSAs are not helpful in this regard as they do not provide timely, insightful, individualized data. Building level administration and classroom teachers need latitude, time, and manageable class sizes in order to meet the incredible diversity of needs students will have as we emerge from the pandemic. But more than academic issues, many students have missed critical connections with peers and caring adults. We must find a balance between addressing academic gaps and rebuilding joyful community.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: Addressing social and racial justice through a lens of anti-bullying is a reasonable first step but limits the scope of the work. One of the values of these initiatives is their role in producing well-rounded citizens, who appreciate and can navigate diversity of thought and experiences in a globally-connected world. School-based social and racial justice initiatives often seek to create a welcoming climate for all students or to diversify curriculum options. We can determine the efficacy of these programs through ongoing, intentional feedback cycles with students, staff, and the community, including school climate surveys. This feedback only helps, however, when we are humble enough to receive it and to learn and grow during the process.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: Charter and cyber-charter schools have their place in the public education ecosystem, but Pennsylvania's charter funding formula wastes taxpayer resources. Special education funding that does not have to be spent on special education services, and taxpayer funds used to pay for seven-figure CEO salaries and lobbying efforts are just a few of the abuses allowed for charter schools in the current system. Those permissible abuses come at the expense of the taxpayer and local school districts, as charter school expenses are among each district's highest annual budget line items. Localities are handcuffed. The funding formula is a challenge Harrisburg must solve, even though its ramifications are felt most at the local school board level.



Rick McClure

Party: Rep

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: rmcclure@friendsofna.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://friendsofna.com>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofna/>

District: North Allegheny School District

Education: Bachelor of Science - Human Resources Management & Business - Geneva College

Qualifications for office: The second largest district expense is the construction and maintenance of facilities. In my 5 years on the NA Board, I have successfully led efforts that have saved many millions of taxpayer dollars. The district's long-term facilities plans will continue to benefit from my experience.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: Crises can often bring about change in an abbreviated period while in "normal times", years of planning may be needed to achieve a similar result. The situation of the past year has forced alternative learning methods into the mainstream. Some programs have worked better than others and some students have found remote learning to be challenging while others have thrived. Assessment tools need to be consistent with pre-pandemic measurements since in this manner we can truly determine the effectiveness of the education over this past year. Gaps will be revealed. Remedial efforts, such as added tutoring, modified curriculum, and special summer programs can be constructed to address shortcomings

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: North Allegheny's robust diversity programs are an important part of the learning experience for all students at each level of their NA education. The School Climate Studies are the primary tool used to measure the effectiveness and to identify strengths and challenges in the programs. Continuing the use of this valuable tool allows for a consistent assessment over a period of years and highlights opportunities for improvement and for celebrating positive progress.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: Each child is unique and while most respond well to the traditional school environment, some children require specialized services that may be difficult to address in the public-school setting. All students are guaranteed a Free and Appropriate Public Education and if the district is not able to provide appropriate services, then alternative providers are an option that can meet a specific need. Therefore, the public institution can focus on and serve the broader population.



Joe Wall

Party: Rep

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: joe@friendsofna.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://www.friendsofna.com>

Education: North Allegheny 1983 University of Pittsburgh 1987

Qualifications for office: I am a security professional specializing in vulnerability assessment and risk mitigation. I believe my business experience, along with my involvement with North Allegheny for many years, along with my love of the district makes me feel that I'm uniquely qualified.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

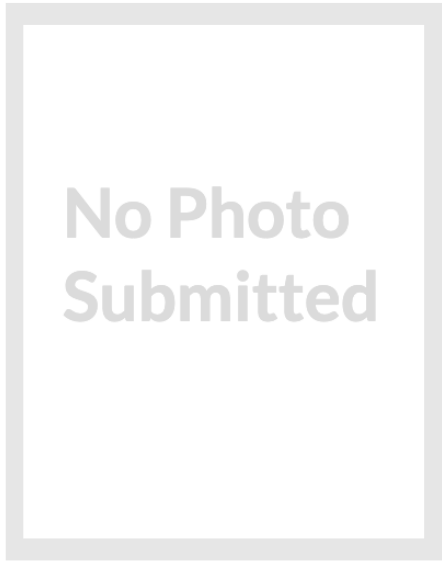
A: As a School Board Director, it is our responsibility to oversee the Administration, and to provide whatever resources are necessary for student achievement. As someone that comes directly from an educational background, I understand the concerns in this area. North Allegheny developed the North Allegheny Cyber Academy, which provides, not only a viable option for students, but is also fiscally responsible to the taxpayers.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: It is my contention that North Allegheny has already in place, a program that constantly monitors the key factors for success for students, and addresses concerns regarding bullying. It is a School Board Director's responsibility to oversee the Administration, and to make adjustments, or changes, based upon the needs of the students. I believe we need to focus on the education of ALL North Allegheny students, and continue to challenge every student to reach higher, go farther, and to realize their full potential.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: Equity in Education is about opportunity. I believe in opportunity for every single student at North Allegheny. However, some students have needs that fall outside the normal classroom environment. I believe in funding public education, and at North Allegheny, we have the options for both in-person K-12 instruction, or through the North Allegheny Cyber Academy.



Greg Casten

Party: Rep

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: info@friendsofna.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://friendsofna.com>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsofNA/>

District: North Allegheny

Education: B.S. Management - Lehigh University; Certified Financial Planner

Qualifications for office: Working in Finance for the past 32 years, I will be able to bring a wealth of experience in budgeting, Municipal Bond financing, investing and Financial Planning to the NA School Board.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: As a school board member, it is our responsibility to work with the teachers and administrators to assess where the learning deficiencies are, and to come up with a cost effective solution to remedy them. Realizing that this past year has been a very unusual year, several different solutions to remedy the loss of learning for so many students may be summer school, on line tutoring, Kahn Academy, or classes on Saturday mornings.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: Let's not forget that diversity of opinion is important - even if we disagree with it. North Allegheny has a zero tolerance anti - bullying program in place that works extremely well. In addition, the school district participates in the Pennsylvania Safe 2 Say program that is also extremely effective as an anti - bullying program. Both of these programs are currently in place and do not need to be improved upon.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: Each parent should have the ability to choose the best school for their child. In the North Allegheny School District parents have the opportunity to choose between in person education or NA Cyber Academy. If a parent chooses another option outside of the school district, such as a Charter School or Catholic School they should be allowed to make that decision on behalf of their child. The schools should be open 5 days per week for in person education and extracurricular activities.



Vidya Szymkowiak

Party: Rep

Biographical Info:

Campaign Email: info@friendsofna.com

Campaign Web Site: <http://friendsofna.com>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsofNA/>

District: North Allegheny School District

Education: B.S. Chemical Engineering - Penn State University; B.S. Chemistry - Penn State University; M.D. - University of Pittsburgh; Residency (Internal Medicine) - UPMC

Qualifications for office: As a primary care physician, I will bring expertise in understanding the current evidence and applying that data in a nuanced and balanced manner. As a business owner, I recognize that spending must be carefully managed to promote the best return on investment for our students and community.

Questions:

Q: *The pandemic has highlighted the significant disparity in educational delivery in districts from no in-person learning, to hybrid models to full time in-person sessions resulting in uneven student performance. As schools reopen, how would you propose to assess student achievement and to remedy the loss of learning for so many students?*

A: Because districts adopted a variety of disparate approaches to pandemic education delivery, we have the opportunity to utilize existing education assessment tools to evaluate student outcomes in terms of academic achievement as well as emotional and physical health. Simply put - let us look back and see which school districts' strategies and choices worked for our kids and which did not. In the next few years, school directors - working closely with administrators, front-line educators, and parents - will have the responsibility to utilize an evidence-based approach to implement policies that support novel and successful educational methods.

Q: *Social and racial justice issues have become a concern for all school districts, many of which have instituted anti-bullying programs to help address these issues. What kinds of criteria would you propose to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns and progress toward improvement?*

A: Over the last few decades, many BIPOC families have chosen to move to North Allegheny because these families recognize the value of a solid educational background in serving as an equalizer in terms of future opportunity. As an immigrant hailing from India, I can honestly say that this consideration was foremost in my parents' minds when we moved to North Allegheny in 1984. Every North Allegheny student should have access to a high-quality education tailored to their individual needs. Parents and educators should be empowered to be advocates for students. In the classroom and via extracurricular activities, students should have the opportunity to create cultural understanding by working with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Q: *Pennsylvania currently allows parents to choose whether their children attend public schools, charter, or cyber-charter schools with funding provided by state and local opponents of all of these options. Where do you stand and explain your position.*

A: Changes caused by the pandemic have been traumatic for many students and their families. However, this type of "black swan event" also offers the opportunity to reconsider our approach to education. For example, the highly successful NA Cyber Academy arose from the necessity created by the pandemic while - simultaneously - the critical need for in-person education became glaringly apparent. This difficult year has brought into sharp focus the fact that parents are the ultimate advocates for their children. Therefore, parents MUST have choices in terms of education delivery. Through the pandemic experience, it has also become clear that these options can be offered in a fiscally responsible manner to the benefit of local taxpayers.