



Meet the Candidates Running for the West Babylon Board of Education

There are six candidates running for three open seats on the West Babylon Board of Education. The terms are for three years. This year's voting will be by mail-in ballot, which must be received by the district clerk by June 9th at 5 p.m. The candidates, who will appear on the ballot in alphabetical order, are: Matthew Amore, Raymond Downey (incumbent), Cathy Gismervik (incumbent), Kelly Hamblin, Dennis Kranz, and Jennifer Longo (incumbent).

Each candidate was sent a questionnaire with following 10 questions. We hope that their answers will help you to make an informed choice in this election.

Candidate Information

1. Please tell us a little about yourself and share the reasons you are seeking a seat on the Board of Education. What experience do you have that will be beneficial to the school board?

Kelly Hamblin: I would like to introduce myself. My name is Kelly Hamblin (Cooper). I was born and raised in West Babylon, and I attended Forest Avenue elementary school. I have one daughter who also went through West Babylon schools and graduated in June 2019. While my daughter was at Forest Avenue, I was active in the PTA, I was a class parent, and I was on the yearbook committee for several years. While she attended junior high and high school, I supported my daughter and her peers in various activities, including tennis, clubs, and Blue and Gold.

Advocacy for students is one of my highest priorities as a mother, a teacher, an administrator, and as a West Babylon alumnus and resident. I have been a special education teacher for 23 years. Currently, I am the curriculum coordinator/assistant principal at a school for students with special needs. I have been in this position for years. One of the main areas that I have my teachers focus on is Social-Emotional Learning. We have a program in place based on positive reinforcement and coping strategies. In the current learning environment, this has become even more important. The teachers and I meet weekly to discuss ongoing concerns with families and students and develop strategies to help them during this difficult time.

I want to establish a climate of trust and transparency on the school board, to rebuild trust between the community, district administration, and school board. The lack of confidence/trust is a common theme I have heard for several years, and it has been expressed as I have met with voters. They view this to be a damaged relationship and want to see it addressed. We need leaders who are willing to bring an open mind to every discussion and who are eager to hear from community members. A parent or guardian's involvement at their child's school is a crucial factor in the student's success. It is vital that parents feel their input is welcomed and that their child's care and education are effective and in accordance with state and federal mandates.

I also continually educate myself and take workshops and classes on the ever-changing programs and curriculum. During this time, I have been researching SEL programs and engaging in professional development opportunities to learn how to best support students in these difficult times. Parents of WB and other districts sometimes ask for my assistance when struggling with approaching the teachers or administration to discuss

meeting the students. Advocacy and transparency are two characteristics that have enabled me to hold my current professional position, and as a BOE member, I will continue to be there and support all the students and families of West Babylon. Another priority would be to work respectfully and productively with other board members so we can keep our focus on helping students to be successful by resolving the issues of inequality and special needs, as well as continuing the many excellent programs provided by our amazing community of teachers and staff.

Ray Downey: I have been a PE teacher in the Levittown school district for the past 30 years. My wife and I have four children. My oldest graduated last year from West Babylon and currently attends Stony Brook University. I have two children in our high school and one at JFK elementary school. I have been a West Babylon board of education trustee for the past six years. During the past six years, I have been a part of a team that worked on our \$30 million bond referendum. Our bond referendum has repaired and upgraded all of our buildings in West Babylon. Besides my six years' experience as a trustee in West Babylon, my 30 years of experience working in the public schools gives me a very good understanding how the public school system works. Over my 30 years of teaching, I worked at every level from k-12. I spent 15 years in the elementary school, 13 years in the middle school, and two years in the high school. I believe all of my experience has been and will continue to be very beneficial to our school board.

Dennis Kranz: My wife Kathy and I have been living in West Babylon since 1992. We have three children, Dennis, Jillian and Timothy, who have graduated from WB. Thankfully, they have gone on to graduate from Dowling College, SUNY-Oswego, and State University of South Carolina- Lander. I am retired from the New York City Police Department in the rank of Lieutenant. I currently work for Professional Security Consultants as the Vice President of Operations. Thru my time in West Babylon, I have volunteered to coach for various organizations (West Babylon Youth Baseball, WB Football, CYO Basketball and youth center sports).

I have served on the West Babylon School Board for 6 years. The ability to work with 8 other board members and administration has been my best attribute. As a team we have worked together as a board to accomplish what is right for West Babylon Schools. My hope is that I can continue to do my part for the children of West Babylon.

My hope is our students and teachers can return to class in September. The District needs to look to all ideas to keep children and staff safe. The ideas of split days and possibly alternating days need to be an option. We need to get the students and teachers back to school so they can flourish in our schools.

I hope you will consider me as your choice to fill one of the three open trustee positions.

Jennifer Longo: I'm Jennifer Longo graduate and a lifelong resident of West Babylon. My husband and I have raised our 3 children in this community, two who have graduated from the district. I've been an active member in the community for years. I've been president of Santapogue PTA and PTA Council. I served as a board member on the Main Street Organization for 5 years. When PTA's used to run the Preschool program, I ran that for 4 years. I've organized and ran the district's Fun run and wellness fair.

I feel that I am a good fit on the board because of my experiences with the district. My children are very different students. One was an average student that was involved with music, one was an honors/AP sports student, and one is a special education/inclusion student. Also two of my children have benefitted and received certificates from the Boces tech program. I feel that I have knowledge on all programs and know what works and what could be improved. I can be fair to all programs because my children were part of all programs.

Also before I got a seat on the board I used to work for the district, so I have an idea of what teachers and students need in the classroom.

Matthew Amore: My name is Matthew Amore. Have lived in West Babylon for almost 9 years. We chose this as the town we wanted to raise our family in. My wife, Danielle, and I have 3 children. Sophia (10), Savannah (7) and Chase (3). Our daughters attend Santapogue Elementary School. I am the Vice President of Santapogue Elementary School PTA, and have been involved now for 3 years. I have been a class dad for 3 years as well, and there was a Newsday Article done on exceptional fathers involved with their children at school which I was featured in. I have my Bachelors Degree in Childhood Education from SUNY Old Westbury. I spent time working in the Brentwood School District before leaving to take an opportunity in training for a retail company, Best Market. I worked with them for 15 years, doing training, and upper management operations. My skills in time management, customer service, and budgeting will be imperative during my time on the BOE. My training in a childhood education background, and the years of working with training programs has provided me the proper skills to understand how to get a group of over 3500 people, all different, to understand the same direction. Currently working as a district manager for the 3rd largest retailer in the world, LIDL.

Cathy Gismervik: As a 3 term incumbent serving on the Board of Education, I possess the level of institutional knowledge necessary to make decisions and adapt especially during these uncertain times. It takes time to develop the necessary working relationships with central administration, the various unions throughout the district, and other members of the Board of Education. My background permits our district to have a seamless transition.

Distance Learning and the Return to School

2. Do you believe students and staff can safely return to school in September? What plans would you put forth to safely meet social distancing guidelines, e.g., split session, alternating days, etc.?

Ray Downey: The way this pandemic has gone it's very difficult to know if students and staff can safely return to school in September. It's a little too early to know what will happen in September. There have been different ideas that have been socially discussed regarding going back to school in September. But as time gets closer I believe our administration and Board of Education will come up with the safest and best way to return to school. Most local school districts work together so everybody shares everyone's ideas which helps everyone.

Jennifer Longo: I believe students and staff can safely return to school in September. I'm sure there will be guidelines set forth by NY State that we would have to follow and we wouldn't have much of a say on what is done. I'm sure we would be wearing masks. If we do have a say I think one of the better ways is to have split days. It will be a little easier to do it at the elementary level then at the secondary. Students go to school on alternating days and those students who aren't physically in school can maybe watch through distance learning. Please be assured nothing will replace face to face teaching.

Matthew Amore: I believe that come September, we will be able to return to school safely. I think there is always the common fear that our children will pick up a virus, cold, bug or other ailments while at school. Now we just have to make sure that everyone follows guidelines set out by the CDC and the Department of Health as best as we can. I believe the first and foremost change should be not only teaching, but enforcing personal hygiene. Making it a practice to have all ages of children wash their hands before lunch, after lunch, when they leave and enter a classroom. 'Touch Points,' like your face, hat, other's desk etc should be taught as well. Desk facing one way in the classroom would be a help, so that the children are not face to face for an extended period of time. I think there could also be a switch in lunch programming, where there are limited children at each of the tables, and extended times for lunch so we can have less people in our cafeterias. Our teachers

should play a large role in coming up with extending plans that they think would help stop the spread of any virus, and not interrupt with the learnings of our children. Using the cleaning company to train staff on how to properly sanitize throughout the day would be wonderful as well. We are at a point where a good cleaning once a day might not be enough.

Cathy Gismervik: With a sense of optimism, I hope that students and staff can safely return to school in September, however as we have witnessed over the past several months while coping with COVID-19, it is imperative to follow guidelines put forth by the state government and trust in the science and data from medical experts. I trust that the central administration will handle forthcoming decisions with the diligence and attention to detail that will be required to provide a safe and impactful learning experience for students, staff, and faculty.

Kelly Hamblin: Predicting if schools will open in September is complicated since there are too many unknowns right now. I believe schools will look different in September if we return. There will be new precautions in place to keep our teachers, students, and faculty safe. One of the safeguards that I would put in place would be to limit having parents and community members in the buildings. Limiting people in schools is not a great option, but I feel it needs to happen. Parent meetings could occur virtually using one of the many available platforms. PTA, SEPTA, BOE meetings can all be virtual. The benefit of this is that it would allow working parents the flexibility of attending meetings without having to take time off. Additionally, social distancing is critical and must be enforced. Having markers in the hallways for the 6 feet apart would help students maintain appropriate distance. Having the students and faculty wearing masks or protective shields during the school day may be difficult for students and even some faculty, but wearing masks is very important to ensure safety. Students with anxiety or students with sensory issues may have a difficult time with the masks or face coverings.

If the schools decide to return on a limited schedule, this will also require a plan. The schools would need to disinfect every evening to make the students attending the next day to have a clean and safe environment. Teachers would have to plan lessons or activities for the students to complete at home on an off day. Both split sessions or alternating days could also cause hardship for parents who work. For students who have 504 or IEPs, there has to be a plan in place to ensure the students will receive their mandated services and modifications.

The most important aspect of planning for the fall is preparing students before returning to school for what the "new normal" will be. Students and families need to be ready for the changes. Some of the recommendations include smaller class sizes and staying in the same classroom all day. These are concerns for me since students of all ages need to move and be stimulated to stay focused and to be active learners. Students need to know they are returning to a safe environment that also meets their needs.

3. If students are unable to return to the classroom in September, what ideas do you have to enhance virtual learning? Also, what minimums would you like to see in place in terms of the amount of instruction a student receives per day or per week?

Jennifer Longo: If students can't return to school in September, I think there should be at least 3 days of online interaction/instruction between students and teachers. I'm not saying the same amount of hours of a regular school day but something. On the off days have teachers set a set time for parents or students to discuss any problems or concerns they have. Kind of like "office hours" in college. We would also have to put in place some type of Professional Development for staff to keep them up to date with enhanced distance learning.

Matthew Amore: Virtual Learning is not the future of our schools. If it comes to the point where we cannot return to our classrooms, one of the changes I would make would be for the same formatting. Our teachers have done everything possible during this difficult time, between trying to learn a new way to teach, without their supplies from class, and without a group atmosphere or routine. Harder to get 20 children to have the same attention over the computer. I would say that the district, with the help of our teachers, should come up with plans so that all children are getting the same experience. There should be less overlap for the older children who are taking many different classes with many different teachers. Having a schedule that works for everyone, although sounding impossible, is imperative. For the younger grades, keep the teachers on the same page. If one class is doing Google Meets for 30 minutes a day, then they all should be. As far as how much live instruction, I do not necessarily think there should be a set time for instruction daily. Instead, there should definitely be a set time for different lessons. For example, if there is new instruction in Math on Tuesday, everyone should get the same amount of time to learn the Math lesson.

Cathy Gismervik: The teachers in West Babylon are working incredibly hard (many times dealing with their own obstacles) to make sure that the educational needs of the students in the district are being met. Guidelines to direct instructional modalities will be agreed upon by central administration and the teachers union with a focus on ensuring learning outcomes can be obtained by all of our students.

Kelly Hamblin: If students do not return to school in September, students should receive as close as possible the education they would receive if they were in school. There should be at least one or two live meetings per subject to assist with questions or areas of difficulties. Lessons can be pre-recorded, and students can watch the lecture when time allows. Assignments should be completed in a timely fashion, but students will have to let teachers know about extenuating circumstances that may not allow the work to be done on time. Attendance could be taken by assignments handed in, and students would have to comment on the lessons they viewed. Students with 504 and IEPs should have their mandates met as if they were in school. Schools should assist families to the best of their capabilities for students who may not have access to computers or the Internet.

Schools should also implement time for social-emotional learning curriculum for the students. Being home and having virtual learning would continue to be difficult for students, and it is essential to make sure that they are all right. Being home and not consistently having the typical socialization they are used to can have a considerable impact. The students' social and emotional needs need to be addressed as much as possible in the curriculum. Teachers should be checking in with students and families regularly to make sure everyone is well and if they have any needs. In my school, I am the curriculum coordinator/assistant principal. I have my teachers reach out to families weekly. As I said in my post a few days ago, when children are socially and emotionally ready, that's when we see a greater gain in academic skills. Just because the platform for learning has changed doesn't mean we forget this vital piece to the puzzle. When I am on the school board, I will focus on ensuring that there's a support system in place for our families.

Ray Downey: My wife and I both have been teaching virtually so my experience will certainly benefit West Babylon students. Every day comes new ideas with teaching virtually. It's very difficult to put a set amount of time per day or per week for students. Some subject areas are more important than others when it comes to virtual learning and getting prepared for college.

4. If you could be a part of New York's Reimagine Education Advisory Council, whose purpose is "to help districts reimagine schools as they prepare to reopen while protecting health and safety, how virtual learning can bridge the gap, and supplement face to face education when schools reopen," what would you list as your top concerns and priorities?

Matthew Amore: I think the Reimagine Education Advisory Council should be focusing on evaluating where each child is individually, academically, and also mentally. Being away from the students for such a long time also keeps our educators out of the loop on what is going on in their lives daily. Depending on each child's experience during this pandemic should determine how we approach. As a whole, the council should be focusing on a complete re-evaluation of our current school model. If we truly needed to, re-do this entire pandemic where did we go wrong, and how can we make sure that we have the best interest of our children, and our teachers. I do not believe that virtual learning can bridge the gap of our current model of education. A true virtual learning, that might work, as best case scenario would be to keep the same exact school day, and have teachers live with the students as the day went on. Essentially school, but on a computer screen. The focus, in my opinion should be more on how to make this work inside the school safely, and how we can change our current education model. If we lose focus on what school is meant to be, inside a classroom, we can possibly fall back on a system like distance learning that is just not the same as face to face learning. It is definitely a tricky situation for all involved, and it really will take more than a few meetings, or a few months to figure out what is 100% right for this situation.

Cathy Gismervik: My top priority and concern is the health of the students and staff. Once we ensure that we are protecting the health and safety of our community, we have to make sure that we tackle the possibility of regression. I would also advocate to ensure educational opportunities are equitable for all West Babylon students regardless of their home situation.

Kelly Hamblin: My top concern is the social-emotional effect that this pandemic has had on our students. Some children may be concerned about returning to school with fear of getting COVID-19 or bringing it home. Students have been home with their parents for at least five months and may have difficulty separating from their parents. We need a plan to make this transition as easy as possible for the students. The procedure may include having the students come into the school before classes resume so they can see what the "new normal" will be for them.

Social distancing, reducing class sizes, and limiting movement throughout the building are all great ways to help reduce the possibility of contamination, but not without a cost to education. Some students will not be able to be safely six feet away from teachers or paras. These same students may not understand what social distancing means and are not capable of doing this. Reducing class sizes will be a concern because of space in the schools. Limiting movement and having students stay in the same room all day can be difficult. Students of all ages need to move and be stimulated to stay focused and to be active learners. Students need to know they are returning to a safe environment.

Virtual learning should continue to be an option for students who may be a high risk of returning to school or if a student becomes sick. Teachers could have a digital copy of class notes available or record some of the lessons and make them available for students to view.

Ray Downey: If we had to go to virtual learning one of my top concerns would be the lack of socialization and interaction among our students. One of my top priorities would be for all of our students to have their accommodations met whether they be special education, accelerated learners or regular ed students.

Jennifer Longo: Virtual learning will never replace face to face learning. A concern would be the social aspect of students not having interaction with their peers. How would they learn to socialize better, problem solve, and work together? In a school setting students have more opportunities to talk about things to

teachers, social workers, and counselors that they might not necessarily speak to their parents/guardians about.

Another concern I have is with our special Education population. These students typically need structure and routine. Without a structured environment you can see students regress and struggle. How would they receive certain services like occupational, physical, and speech therapy? With some of those services you need to be hands on.

District and Educational Priorities

5. Outside of the current pandemic and safe return to school, what do you think is the greatest challenge our district faces? What are your priorities for the district?

Cathy Gismervik: The greatest challenge our district faces is the short term and long term effects on our students. They are facing a challenge we have never dealt with before academically, emotionally, and socially. The well-being of the children should be our biggest priority. I look forward to the day the athletes can play, the music/theater students can perform, STEM students can discover/build, art students can create, and everyone can learn in a safe environment together.

Kelly Hamblin: With mental illness on the rise, social-emotional education (SEL) should be embedded into the daily curriculum starting from UPK to senior year of high school so that every student can benefit. There are many different curriculums that the district could use. The best ones recommend that schools allow for more movement breaks throughout the day, even if it's to stretch simply. Additionally, the focus should be on the strengths of the child, and lessons should be adapted to meet those strengths. Finally, being aware and present is an essential characteristic that teachers and administrators should have.

An area that is of great concern is the funding that the schools receive from the state. The funding is never a guarantee and can change year to year. At present, the talk is that funding will be cut by 20%. How will this be handled? What programs will be cut? For instance, money spent on providing benefits, reducing class sizes, increasing support staff, providing better tools for education, and improving professional development opportunities all benefit teachers in ways that cannot be measured financially. As district leaders wrestle with difficult priority lists, they need to maintain open communication with their staff to understand their needs better and help explain the bigger picture of spending decisions. In figuring out how much goes where, superintendents may need to reevaluate how top-heavy their districts are and how much money is reaching the classroom.

Ray Downey: Our greatest challenge for our district is keeping all of our current programs. The crisis that we are in all districts are faced with cutting their budgets. My priorities would be with keeping all the programs that affect the most children in our district. My priority is giving all of our children a well rounded education from academics to social interaction.

Jennifer Longo: The challenges our district faces are unfunded mandates, budget constraints, technology, improving our social and emotional aspects and community engagement. Why is it when New York State mandates us to follow their rules and implement them, they don't give us the funding needed to do what they ask? They talk about wanting us to do state testing through computers. Why should the district have to pay for the computers and programs needed for their testing? We then have to have money to implement these things. Where does that money come from? Our taxes. If they want these things in place they should give us funding.

When it comes time for the budget, we have been under the cap for years. We've been lucky enough to be subsidizing what we need from our reserves (savings). As of now we have not received our last payment of state aide for the 2019-2020 school year. Since school was closed, I'm sure the state is going to say we don't

need all of the aide. So the district is going to have to come up with money from somewhere. Sooner or later we will run out of money in our reserves. A priority for the district is enhanced technology. If we have learned anything thing in the last couple of months, it's that we need to get on the road with more technology in learning. We need to have professional development and get more ChromeBooks for our students.

Kids today have a lot on their plate. We need to be ready to handle them mentally and emotionally. Students face problems within family, school, and social media. We have added social workers and guidance counselors, but we can have more. We need to be available to these students.

In the last couple of years, we have improved with communication. The district is now on social media and there are email blasts that go out monthly of what is happening in the district. It's a start but we can do better.

Matthew Amore: I think the number one thing we lack as a district is communication. It's important to remember that we serve the entire community, and not just the 10-20 people who show up to our meetings each month. We should make it our responsibility to go out and interact with all the members of this fantastic community. Answer the questions, even the hard ones, and be direct and transparent with your tax payers. There has to be a reason why our turnout is low at most of our school held events, let's find out why. There's so much information out there in the community, and you can learn so much by just communicating. I truly believe that if I didn't seek the information I was looking for, I wouldn't have a clue as to what was going on. One priority for the district is transparency. Let's get on the same page, and then deliver and communicate to the community. When you create a relationship with your community, through communication, you will be able to find out exactly what they are seeking, and then work on delivering those things. I've recently also added that a priority will be to launch a major anti-bullying campaign. I think that cyber bullying is real, and during distance learning, with children on their phones and computers so often, it will be much easier for bullying to occur, and much harder for us to catch on to it as parents.

6. What is your vision for education in our schools? What are your areas of concern regarding student achievement? Do you have specific suggestions for improvement?

Kelly Hamblin: My vision is to support and nurture the children's and our own natural desire to be life-long learners. We are committed to the families we serve, providing support and encouragement. To provide a safe learning environment with a welcoming atmosphere, which creates a sense of belonging among our families.

There needs to be an equal push for college and vocational careers. Not everyone is ready for college right from high school; some may never want to go to college, and there's nothing wrong with that by showing students what other options that are out there is extremely important. Job fairs and vocational programs are just as important as college fairs. We need to start this at a young age. In 10th grade, the students are introduced to BOCES and have a chance to see a program, but they only get to look at one choice. In the 8th and 9th grades, they should start learning about these programs. Students should have a required class to learn about college planning, vocational paths, and essential life skills. In this class, students should learn about check writing, managing money, resume writing, etc. The focus should also be on college and preparing them for this - learning how to budget their time, money, etc. Having the school focus on academic and life skills helps prepare the students for real life. This doesn't make anyone feel that they aren't good enough if they don't choose the college route. All students deserve an equal education. Equal doesn't mean the same. Each child is unique.

Continued implementation of social-emotional learning into the curriculum is an area that is also a concern. With mental illness on the rise, education needs to start from toddler age and throughout high school. SEL should be embedded into the daily curriculum starting from UPK to senior year of high school. When this is embedded into the curriculum, we can be assured every student will be exposed and hopefully take something away from it. There are many different curriculums out there that the district can use. For it to be a good curriculum, it should have five essential components. The school system should allow for more

movement breaks throughout the day, even if it's to do a stretch or something standing near their desks. The focus should be on the strengths of the child, and lessons should be adapted to meet those strengths. Being aware and present is an essential characteristic that teachers and administrators should have.

We also need to invest in our teachers: In the wake of state-level changes, I believe the board needs to give our teachers concrete assurance that they are invaluable components to our success as a district. Our board and district must take all reasonable steps to ensure that we can retain stellar teachers, recognizing their dedication to our students and our community.

Ray Downey: My vision for education in our schools is that each individual child's needs are met. No child should be left behind, success for every student. We need kids to enjoy learning and have a want to come to school to learn and interact. One improvement that can be made are smaller class sizes.

Jennifer Longo: My vision for education is to have every student successful. We have to help those students that need extra help by having Academic Intervention Service, as well as needing to have services for our gifted students to challenge them. We need to look at the student as a whole. Possibly offer some type of an elective class at the elementary level, like a cooking class or a wood working class. Why wait until Jr. High? Maybe at the high school level we offer more "real life" classes. How to write a resume, how to interview, balance a check book. Real life skills.

Matthew Amore: The vision of the schools for me is one where we do not put focus on helping our children deal with their stress, but instead focus on what we are doing that is making them stressed. Children, whether 5 or 17 feel stresses every day. Coming to school should be an escape from those stresses, not an addition to. I am a huge fan of letting our teachers, the experts, do their job and educate these children the way they best know how to. I'm a believer in the opt-out movement and think we should side with our community, and focus more on skills and grades inside the classroom, and remove focus of those exams. A district where all children can find something that they can connect to and follow that through their entire time at West Babylon; and of course a district where no matter what a child decides to do, whether it be a trade, college, or becoming a local business owner, that it is supported 100%.

Cathy Gismervik: West Babylon is a caring and collaborative learning community. I want to ensure that each student achieves intellectual and personal excellence, and is well prepared for college and/or career pathways. When we work collaboratively as a community with input from students, parents, teachers, staff, the possibilities are limitless in the relation to the impact on our students.

7. Please discuss an action taken by the board of education in recent years that you have fully supported. Also, please discuss an action that, in retrospect, you would have done differently.

Ray Downey: I fully supported our school district to move forward with armed guards. This was not an easy decision for me but being on the school board and witnessing the process that our administration and school board took made it very easy for me to support. Anything the school board has done in the past six years I have been a part of. Whether I agreed with all the decisions or not we are one team so whatever the decisions were in the end I fully supported.

Jennifer Longo: Actions of the board that I have fully supported were the adding of social workers to the district, and proposing a capital project bond. If we want to emphasize social, emotional learning we need to have the professionals to back it up. So we needed the social workers. Our buildings were in bad shape that's why we needed the capital project. It also looks good in the community that our buildings are in good shape. It's a selling point for people to move here. An action that I would have done differently would have been

voting yes on recording board meetings for the community to see. I have seen recently with the meetings being virtual that there is an interest.

Matthew Amore: I fully support having a stronger security system in our schools. Armed guards, with safety vestibules, and amazing training programs are keeping our children safer than they have ever been. In retrospect I do not agree with the fact that our district did not speak to anyone in our community before making the decisions. Although not mandatory, when changes like this happen, community involvement is so important. When you are looking for support from the community after ignoring them on important issues, you create a divide, instead of togetherness, which is never good for the children.

Cathy Gismervik: I took part in the capital project which was a big undertaking. Our buildings and grounds received major updates and we were even able to update the playground equipment to ensure that our students had a fun and safe place to play.

Kelly Hamblin: When the board of education decided to reduce the amount the regents scores impacted the final grade, this was a good decision. I feel that this should continue to be considered in the future to include a larger population of students.

The decision to place armed guards in the school should have been rescheduled. The meeting where the community had the opportunity to speak was a snowy day. After school, activities were canceled, and the roads were not safe. Many people thought the meeting was canceled. I would have pushed to have this decision postponed to the next meeting to allow the community to have a chance to speak how they felt about this topic. The outcome may or may not have been different, but at least the community would have had the opportunity to let their concerns and feelings be known to the BOE.

Financial Priorities

8. What are your financial priorities for the school district? As a board member, what areas would you consider cutting? Are there any areas you would not cut? How does a school board balance the need to provide a quality education with the need to respond to the local taxpayer burden? Are you in favor of the 2% property tax cap, and what is your philosophy regarding the additional burden items excluded from the cap may place on taxpayers?

Jennifer Longo: A financial priority is to keep taxes low. What excess spending, if any is going on? We need to see what grants are out there to help us subsidize some of our programs. Our district pays tuition for some of our special education students to be taught at different schools. Let's look into what their needs are and maybe keep them in district. If we have to hire specialists, I'm sure it will still be a savings on what we've been spending. There is not an area that I would cut. Everything we offer is a benefit to students.

We have been doing well with our budgets under the tax cap. We have even added services and staff during these times.

Matthew Amore: The most important thing to remember about the budget, is that we are spending other people's money. Every penny means something to someone. The very first thing that I would want to do, is line by line find missing funds or overspends. Find what I like to call, little wins, and try to find alternate ways to spend those funds that will continue to benefit our programs. The most important thing to do, is continue to fund our programs, activities, and sports. The tax cap is a fair one, and staying under it should always be the goal. I believe the majority of people would like to see more things that directly affect the children, and families. And with small wins, we can easily make some of those things happen. Asking the community what they would like to see could go a long way. Transparency.. why we can and cannot do certain things without a run around. Breaking the budget down, so that someone who has not ever worked with one can understand

it. And also, never hide the budget, or wait until last minute. Write a budget we are proud of, and put it out there for all to see.

Cathy Gismervik: I fully support the 2% tax cap making it affordable for anyone in the West Babylon community. Cutting anything is always a difficult task but I trust that administration makes decisions that are for the best of the student body.

Kelly Hamblin: This is a difficult question to answer when there is no direct contact with the behind the scenes decisions of the district right now. There needs to be a look at which programs are not utilized which programs and clubs do not have high enrollment or interest. Software can help administrators spot inefficiencies, such as duplication of responsibilities, through a “position control” system. The system serves as an inventory of various organizational role requirements and budgeted salaries, and reports help managers to evaluate staffing needs. Analytics software also assists in accurately comparing spending, either within a district’s schools or with another district.

We should also consider the out-of-district programs our students attend. Could any of these programs be brought back into the district? Evaluating students and what their needs are if there is a large number of students with the same needs could mean that a program could run within the district. This would save money in the long run. Bringing students back to the district would also allow for students to have the opportunity to be mainstreamed with the general education population. I know West Babylon recently started a preschool program; this program could be expanded. If space allows, there could be a special education preschool program in the district. This would enable students to become familiar with their home school district and save the district money.

Ray Downey: Since the inception of the 2% property tax cap the majority of school districts have been succeeding with passing their budgets on the first try. I am in favor of the 2% tax cap because I have witnessed and been a part of passing budgets that have been successful here in West Babylon. My financial priority is to have a school district that is fiscally sound and our children are getting a great education. One area I would not want to cut are our special education programs on all levels.

Special Education

9. What are your thoughts on the district’s programs for students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and gifted students? What are your views on inclusion, and what do you think the district can do to increase inclusive practices? How will you prioritize adequate training for faculty and staff, including paraprofessionals and security personnel?

Matthew Amore: I think that we can always do better when it comes to any special needs group. I think that building a committee, that can work directly with SEPTA to help make our programs for children with disabilities up to par with what other schools are doing. As far as language goes, we are behind on this as well. We should be teaching language to not only ESL students, but to all students. There have been tons of studies done showing that learning a language at a young age could increase learning and brain development. In a world where English and Spanish are so frequent, our English speaking children should be learning Spanish as early as 1st grade. Imagine a buddy program that allows two children, speaking different languages, helping each other learn. I have said many times, that the first thing we need to do when it comes to inclusive classrooms, is to teach everyone about what an inclusion classroom is. Parents are in the dark as to what the goal of inclusion truly is. We also need to back the funding to get all involved with training for inclusive practices. Being in an inclusion class only works if everyone is on the same page. If a child goes from their home room teacher, to the lunch room, the services and training should be the same. Transparency across the

board, training across the board. The teachers cannot be blamed for something that they may have not been fully trained for, and again the ones who have the bad experience are the children.

Cathy Gismervik: Not everyone learns the same. Students with special learning benefit from tailored instruction to meet students' needs. We will continue to increase the support for teachers and parents of children with special needs by improving learning outcomes, inspiring a love of learning, increasing engagement/self-awareness, and help students learn more efficiently with a deeper understanding. Studies show that the inclusive classroom has positive long-term and short-term benefits for all students. We will cultivate a community of learners by encouraging collaboration and supporting academic validation practices to foster a community of learners. As our students experience the benefits of an inclusive environment, they are more likely to participate and be more involved in the content material which gives them a sense of belonging which is a vital component for improving retention. All students in a class recognize the various adults as resources to their learning – not only as "teachers" for a student with a disability. Support staff will receive ongoing instruction on how to lead small groups of instruction designed by a teacher, gather materials necessary for lessons throughout the day, and facilitate interactions and social relationships among students. There will be open communication and they will be encouraged to ask if the student can participate independently, if they can "aide, then fade", and if the support for the student is out of need or habit.

Kelly Hamblin: Special education is an integral part of the total educational enterprise, not a separate order. The fundamental purposes of special education are the same as those of regular education. West Babylon has implemented programs for students with special needs and general education students to be together, such as Eagle Eyes, a club at the high school. There is also a buddy club in the jr high school, which enables students of different abilities to socialize. This should start in elementary school. Also, we need more workshops starting at the junior high to prepare students for the various pathways.

The inclusion classes should continue to support the students' needs. The study skills periods in high school should focus on one subject at a time and not split the period between two classes. Students with learning differences take time to process what they are learning and the repetition is helpful. By attempting to teach and review various subjects in a short amount of time the students may begin to feel overwhelmed and may have difficulty processing the information. English Language Learners should also continue to be included and encouraged to become active in clubs and activities. The ENL students should also continue to be placed in classrooms using the inclusion model. Programs for the gifted children should be increased, and challenges for those children. When possible, I feel all students should be integrated even if it's for short periods to work on the social-emotional piece. When students are challenged, and expectations are increased, you would be amazed at what they can accomplish.

I would like to find ways to include the parents for the students who are placed out of the district to feel part of our community. Families should be included in their home school events and encouraged to join the SEPTA or PTA to their home elementary school or junior high and high school.

Continued professional development should be ongoing for the teachers and also the paraprofessionals. Anyone who has the potential to come in contact with a child with special needs, both educational or medical, should have continued training. All personnel should have continued training in crisis management for both medical and other emergencies. Understanding the students who are in their classrooms and their needs is an integral part of success.

Ray Downey: First I like to say I have four children, two are special education, one is regular education, and one is considered gifted. It's very important that all students' needs are met. Studies have shown that inclusion classes produce better grades. Two teachers in a classroom is always better than one teacher. By hiring more special education teachers we can have more inclusive classrooms.

Jennifer Longo: The district's program for students with disabilities can be improved. I feel that there needs to be more training given to our paraprofessionals on how to care for students, such as how to deescalate behaviors. I also think all employees should have some type of professional development on children with disabilities, even if they are not directly dealing with those students in class. It's so that they are able to understand what extra care that student might need. Some teachers might not understand that a student has ADD/ADHD, sensory issues, or self harms because they don't have them in their class, but having been trained to notice certain actions can help them and they would know how to handle that student that they wouldn't necessarily have contact with on a day to day basis. I also think at the secondary levels, the skills classes for inclusion students are not being used properly. They should be used to reteach what is being taught. I know some teachers do, but it needs to be consistent throughout. Also at the secondary level I feel co-teachers should have experience in that subject. You can't go from one year in a Geometry class to the following year in a Physics class.

Our English Language Learners classes are great. They have met all of the needs of our students, but I'm sure there's room for improvement.

We definitely lack in the gifted students area although last year we added back some enrichment programs. Student will get bored if they are not challenged. We need to look into some STEM and coding programs. Maybe we introduce an extra class, like an inclusion student has but instead of relearning the subject, they get a more in-depth look at the lesson that was taught.

Communication

10. How should the school board go about learning what members of the community are thinking? What is the best way for the board of education to communicate with the community? Are you in favor of livestreaming board of education meetings and/or making recordings of board meetings available on the district's website?

Cathy Gismervik: Our goal as Board of Education members is to provide all members of the West Babylon School District and community with opportunities to communicate with their elected officials. We welcome you to submit questions, concerns, suggestions, and compliments. Our meetings are always open to the public and I welcome community members to attend and share. Live streaming is not something we have even considered until our recent predicament. I have and will continue to embrace and adapt to any method which will increase the transparency in regards to the BOE and the community.

Kelly Hamblin: The community needs to know that their voice is essential. When members of the community come to BOE meetings to speak, they should feel welcomed and valued. Not everyone is going to agree on decisions made by the BOE, but being transparent is important for community involvement and support. Social media is a great way to communicate with the community, with safety measures and monitoring. If there were a social media method that reminded the community of BOE meetings or workshops being offered throughout the district, this would make community members feel welcome to these events. The past few BOE meetings have been live-streamed and recorded, and it appears that attendance has improved. Live streaming allows families more flexibility to attend and participate in BOE meetings.

Ray Downey: The only way school board members can learn what that community is thinking is by going out there and interacting with the community. Going to school functions and events. Being a part of the community starts with volunteering and getting involved with community affairs. One way for the Board of Education to communicate with the community is by putting out our information on our district website.

I would need to know the financial burden of live streaming Board of Education meetings before deciding if I would be in favor or not.

Jennifer Longo: In order for the school board to learn what the community wants, there needs to be communication. I think the best way to communicate is to maybe have board members contact information more accessible on the website or maybe just have a stand alone Board of Ed website. I know we can use a social media site. As I stated before, I do regret not voting for recording of the board meetings, so that would definitely be something I would want so we can get the community involved.

Matthew Amore: We can start by putting contact information on the district website. Currently, how do you reach a board member? The easiest way to communicate is through constant presence. Being absent from events, meetings, school functions, and meetings like PTA/SEPTA etc. keep you from being hand and hand with our community. It is impossible to be at every thing going on, every time something happens, of course we have families of our own as well, but 2 meetings a month and a few sport games is not enough. You are missing out on a huge part of the community this way! You are missing out on the majority of the community this way. Something like communication is such an easy task to achieve, which is why it is surprising that we are so bad at it. We are far behind on technology communication as well, getting live streamed meetings would easily allow us to reach more people. In a town where so many are working more than one job, and at all different hours, allowing to watch our meetings and events during our own time would be such an easy solution. Another easy way to get communication with the community, is to ask them what they want to talk about. This past year we hosted, what I thought, were great parent workshops. These are things we should put a focus on going forward and try and lift attendance. Maybe do them on live, so our parents do not have to pay a sitter to go to an hour long meeting?

Budget Vote

In addition to voting for the trustees, Proposition 1 on the ballot is for the School Budget. The proposed budget is \$118,267,917, an increase of 3.07% over last year, resulting in a tax levy increase of 3.9521%, which is within the allowable limit. More information on the budget can be found on the district website.

http://wbschools.org/District/budget_information

Please be sure to read the instructions printed on the Absentee Ballot. For your vote to be counted, you must sign and date the "Statement of Absentee Ballot" on the back of the envelope that comes with your ballot.

Thank you for your interest!



Margaret Barrett, president; Kristine Hancock, 1st Vice President; Jodi Amato, 2nd Vice President; Allyson Vail, recording secretary; Kristen Zunno, treasurer; Cathy Crowe, corresponding secretary
ptacouncilpresident@wbschools.org