

COMMENTARY

The Hour

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City seeking ways to keep NHS pool open

It is reassuring that city officials have been putting their heads together to seek a way to keep the Norwalk High School pool open. Mayor Richard A. Moccia and Salvatore Corda, superintendent of schools, joined with finance officials to search for salvation for the pool.

The revelation that the superintendent had included closing the pool in his budget proposal caught some officials short and has generated considerable concern over the threatened closing.

There needs to be some clarity here about just what is needed to continue operation. The superintendent excluded \$291,000 from his budget as the savings from closing it. At a meeting last week, the cost of operating the pool, not including staff, would mean about \$125,000.

The mayor asked for specific utility charges and wants to see a fee structure for those who use the pool. A number of outside organizations — all with worthy programs — use the facility.

Golfers and tennis players pay to use those facilities and, when compared with fees at non-public facilities, they are a bargain.

Keeping the pool open got a boost when USA Swimming, in a letter to the editor in this newspaper, pointed out many logical reasons for keeping the pool open.

It also offered to assist in organizing a program to make the pool self-sustaining at no cost to the city. It cites success it has had in turning around school pools to reach that goal. It deserves a chance to provide this assistance.

Important bills passed — but not the budget

As we await the General Assembly's return to the Capitol to work on a budget, we see that its members have indeed been busy.

They passed laws — some of which have been signed by Gov. M. Jodi Rell — to:

- Allow producers of cider and apple wine to sell and ship these products in-state or out of state;
- Ban selling or giving assault weapons to anyone under the age of 16;
- Require chain restaurants to post calorie counts for items on their menus;
- Allow organizations to conduct bazaars to award cash prizes of up to \$50 for "blower ball games" where players wager on ping pong balls mixed in blown air.
- Allow residents to create legally binding trusts for the care of their pets.

Now that this important stuff is out of the way, maybe we can come up with a budget.

DEAR GAIL AND ART, WHO'S NEXT?

An open letter to DTC and RTC on determining candidates for the BOE

The Norwalk Board of Education (BOE) will fill four vacancies this coming fall as four members of the nine-member board are up for election after serving their terms to possibly be replaced by new members from our town.

Proposing candidates for the coming BOE elections

Here in Norwalk, candidates for the Board of Education are elected for four year terms in an open town wide election (the upcoming election is scheduled for November 3rd — please be sure to vote!) and the new board candidates become candidates for election when proposed by the Democratic and Republican parties in July, headed respectively by: the Town Chair of the Norwalk Democratic Town Committee, Ms. Gail Wall, and the Chairman of the Norwalk Republican Town Committee, Mr. Art Scialabba.

What Does the Board of Education Do?

The Board of Education has one of the most important responsibilities in town — nothing less than helping plan and provide for the very best possible education of our children. As such, the Board's decisions affect not only our children but the overall well being and future of the Norwalk community.

It's not surprising that Norwalk has always made education a priority and that the Board of Education oversees the single largest budget item in the City of Norwalk — (\$151,183,000 is the recommended 09/10 budget) — fully 54 percent of the City's annual budget.

The Board of Education gets far too little credit and does far

too many things to list here, but perhaps it's worth noting the most important. The Board of Education:

- Establishes the mission and charts the course for public education in Norwalk.
- Evaluates and creates policy across the entire K through 12 Norwalk school system.
- Proposes and monitors the school system's budget.
- Selects and works with the Superintendent of Schools who implements Board policy.
- Corresponds and works with in the public educational system at the county, state, and federal level.
- Builds public support and understanding for Norwalk's public education system across the city as a whole.

This fall's elections are critical as always to ensure Norwalk provides its best and its brightest in serving the educational needs of the community. At NEF we believe the Board deserves the continuing, ongoing support of everyone in town. We thank the current members for their hard work and many accomplishments and look forward with anticipation to the coming slates from both parties. Importantly, we take no stand whatsoever on party affiliation and prefer to focus our attention on helping both parties put forward the most engaged, energetic, and informed candidates possible. Acknowledging how difficult it is to know how to choose among the many qualified candidates to be put forward, here are some questions we suggest might make sense as part of the process.

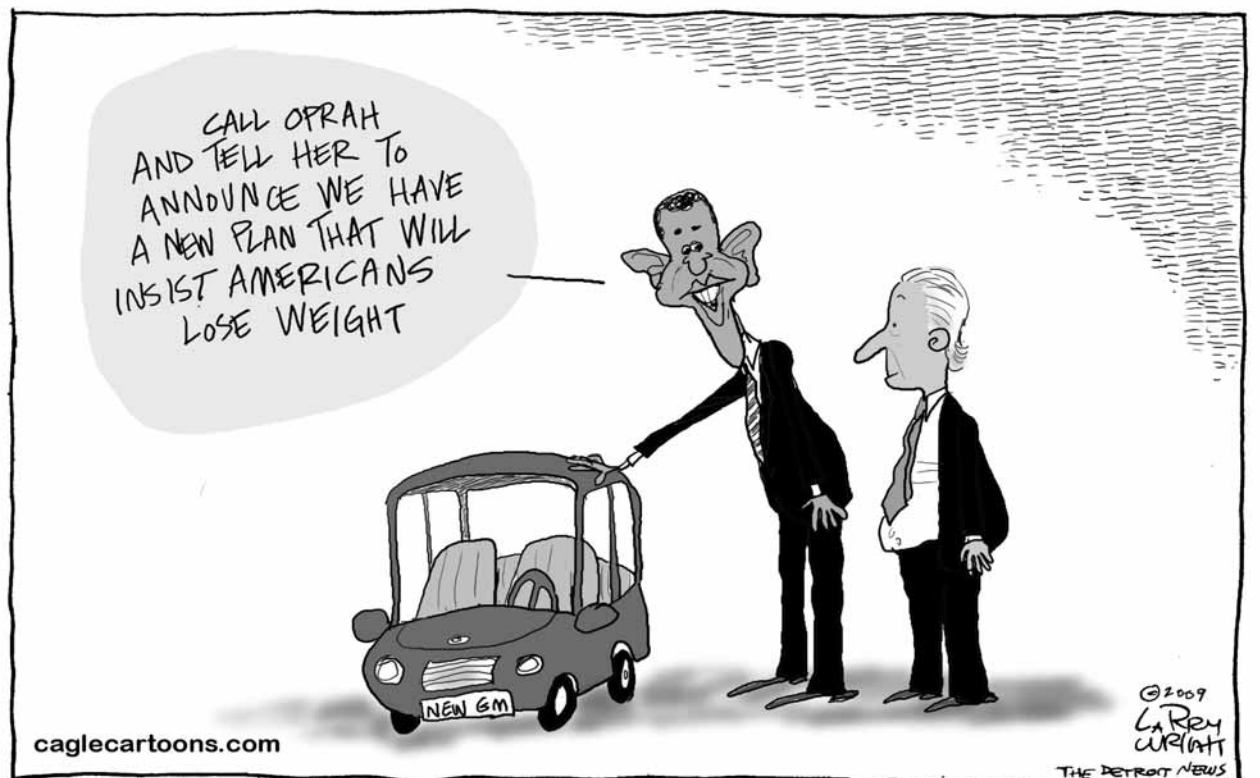
Seven questions for the 2009

Candidates to Norwalk's Board of Education

1. What is your vision for public education in Norwalk?
2. What are the Board's primary roles and responsibilities?
3. Why do you want to serve on Norwalk's Board of Education?
4. What skills and experiences do you see as essential for success as a Board member?
5. How familiar are you with the current curriculum, operations, and finances across the system?
6. What kind of relationship should Norwalk's Board have with the community; with parents and families; with teachers; with administrators; with the superintendent?
7. What are the most pressing challenges facing Norwalk's system over the next two years?

We look forward to the public dialogue on the Board's upcoming needs with the party chairmen Gail and Art and the slate of candidates put forward by both parties. That's what's on our minds, what do you think? Please let us know at norwalkeducation.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

The Norwalk Education Foundation (NEF) is an independent nonprofit organization committed to quality education for all of Norwalk's children. We effect positive change by providing programs and funding for innovative classroom instruction, teacher & technology training, and a variety of learning opportunities beyond the school day. For more information call: (203) 854-4068 or visit www.norwalkeducation.org



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Let's not lose the years of training and the expertise

To the Editor,

As a former principal at Columbus Magnet School I feel obliged to respond to a letter written by Jannie Williams in reference to the instructional assistants at Columbus Magnet School. I believe that it is her unfamiliarity with the school philosophy and the design of the school curriculum that has led to her confusion and the role that these instructional assistants play in the educational program at Columbus. Perhaps at look at the history of Columbus School as it originally existed prior to the formation of the magnet school will help.

In the late 1970's, the racial balance at Columbus School was 87 percent minority and 13 percent non-minority. This exceeded the state mandates. The Board of Education was given an ultimatum, which was to find a way to correct this racial imbalance, or close the school. The Board of Education decided that it did not want to close the only school left in the inner city, and set up a task force to find a way to make the school attractive to parents and students from all over the city. I was fortunate to be selected as principal of the school and with a cadre of parents, members of city agencies, and school staff working under the leadership of the then assistant superintendent Ruby Shaw, we set out to find a program

that would be attractive to city residents.

We were very impressed with the Ryle Magnet School in Stamford that used the Bank Street philosophy of education which was a very child centered approach to teaching with social studies as its core. We recognized immediately the essential role that the instructional assistants played in this program being that it was designed to individualize instruction as much as possible. Every instructional assistant, along with the teachers hired that first year, had to attend workshops for two weeks to learn what the Bank Street philosophy was all about. Every time there was an inservice for the teachers, the instructional assistants were required to attend. In recent years, when Columbus School became a "Hot School," (Higher Order Thinking Skills), the instructional assistants received training along with the certified staff at no cost to the city.

These instructional assistants have many hours of training which will be lost if their position is cut to 27 1/2 hours. This means that they will lose all health benefits and will be forced to find employment elsewhere. They are highly trained, and skilled individuals who contribute in so many ways that enhance the educational program at Columbus. When a teacher is absent, the

instructional assistant often guides the substitute so that the continuity of the Bank Street philosophy and the other unique features of the school program are maintained.

The special features at Columbus Magnet School are the reasons that parents are willing to put their children on a bus that may take 45 minutes to get to school, when in many cases they could walk to their neighborhood school. Many of the special features that were once unique to Columbus are now found in most elementary schools. These were all day kindergarten, full time music, art and physical education teachers. What is left that makes Columbus Magnet School special now is its educational philosophy and the instructional assistants who help reduce the student to adult ratio. Columbus Magnet School is an important part of the district desegregation program. I ask the Board of Education to remember the commitment it made to make Columbus Magnet

School a special educational facility for students from all over the city of Norwalk. Don't take away one of the few remaining features that makes the school special.

Arthur J. Perschino
 Former Columbus magnet School Principal
 300 Lincoln Drive
 Ocean, New Jersey

HOURLY POLL

Will you be visiting the "Sports in Norwalk" exhibit at Norwalk Museum?

Yes	No	Unsure
34.55%	56.36%	9.09%

To vote visit www.thehour.com