

Let's Vote for the Candidates that Have Already Proven They Care About Our Children

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I am the parent of two children, one in 3rd grade at Wallace (part of the Hoboken Public School District -- which I will abbreviate to as "HPSD" for the rest of this article) and one in Kindergarten at a charter school in town which, while public, is not part of the HPSD. HoLa, HCS, and Elysian Charter are each their own school district – so Hoboken has 4 separate school districts. This means that this BoE election represents the power of decision-making that will govern my 3rd grader's school district, but not my kindergartener's school district.

Both of my children are thriving in their individual schools.

People often assume that I hope to move my older child (HPSD) to charter where my younger one attends. We were graciously extended that option, and weighed the option carefully before ultimately deciding against it. My oldest is thriving in so many ways, including in the Johns Hopkins Gifted and Talented program (Verbal and Math) at Wallace Elementary (HPSD).

The HPSD is comprised of the public Pre-K schools, the elementary schools (Brandt, Wallace, Connors), Hoboken Middle School, and Hoboken High School.

I moved to Hoboken 21 years ago and never expected to stay here and raise a family, primarily because my perspective of the public school district was "so bad."

While I have run out of space in my apartment and a backyard sounds wonderful... I now find myself staying *because of* the Hoboken Public School District, rather than in spite of it.

For context, I generally lean fiscally conservative, socially liberal, environmentally liberal.

As a proud parent of both an HPSD student and a Charter School Student, I am voting for the 2-3-4 "Leadership that Listens" slate (Leslie Norwood, Antonio Grana, Alex De La Torre).

A Board of Education ("BoE") should be trusted to make important school-related decisions for the children of their school district (curriculum, facilities, finance) while balancing a responsibility to the taxpayers of their town.

Many of us in Hoboken are very lucky, by way of lotteries or otherwise, to have options.

Having the option for my child to attend his elementary charter school in town is a luxury, and I recognize that not everyone in our town has the luxury of choosing which elementary school to attend (the charters reserve slots for siblings and the rest are chosen via lottery system).

- NJ has 600 Public School Districts and only 87 charter schools.
- Hoboken has one Public School District and 3 charter schools.
- I constantly remind myself that, without HPSD, there would be no HoLa, no HCS, no Elysian-- the three charter school districts of Hoboken, NJ.

My perspective on our Hoboken Public School District, which is led by Superintendent Dr. Christine Johnson

I have never felt so thankful (and ultimately, proud) to live in Hoboken as I did when September 2020 arrived.

March-June 2020 was TOUGH. With schools in most of the country closed down to in-person learning, so many individuals and families left Hoboken in search of more personal (and outdoor) space.

Then something interesting happened: in June 2020, all parents of HPSD children started receiving non-binding pulsed surveys from Superintendent Dr. Christine Johnson asking what styles of learning (in person/remote) would make them feel most comfortable. Dr. Johnson sought parental input to keep our children both learning and safe. Hired as HPSD Superintendent in July 2015, she has been authentic and steadfast in her approach since the day she arrived.

As the parent of a then-rising-first-grade daughter desperate, emotionally, to resume some sense of normalcy and return to the place she loved, and my own anxiety very real, Dr. Johnson was able to provide a safe learning environment for both students and teachers in the worst of situations.

[Full-time in-person learning at Hoboken schools since fall \(fox5ny.com\)](https://www.fox5ny.com/news/full-time-in-person-learning-at-hoboken-schools-since-fall-2020-11-11)

This roll out was not "pushing an agenda." This is the very essence of a leadership that listens. Dr. Johnson's collaborative leadership enabled her to offer both safe and practical options for her 3000+ charges.

The **Leadership that Listens slate (2-3-4)**, similarly, has been walking around, knocking on doors, meeting people in person, listening to what both parents and non-parents need and want... not pushing an agenda.

They have put in the work for sure. They have met with every group and answered every questionnaire that was requested of them (for example, Moms Demand Action Gun Sense Candidate Survey). They understand that they have a duty to be both fiscally responsible as well as forward-thinking for the children, who will soon become young adults and decision makers themselves, and the taxpayers. Hoboken's Public School District has come such a long way, particularly since Dr. Christine Johnson joined us in 2015.

The candidates of the Leadership that Listens slate (2-3-4) emulate my values.

Regarding Charter Schools, Testing, and Funding-- shouldn't all students be treated equally?

As a charter school parent, let me reiterate that I love my child's school.

Charter parents that are asking for representation on the HPSD BoE should be pleased to know that Tom Kluepfel, one of the founding members of Elysian Charter School, sits on the HPSD BoE. He has been serving since 2012.

The charter schools are self-governing and each elects its own Board of Trustees (just like how the HPSD has the BoE). These charters get their funding directly out of the HPSD budget... HOWEVER, this number is determined by the Department of Education in TRENTON-- the Hoboken BoE is not involved in determining funding for Hoboken charters whatsoever.

Ask any charter school parent-- or any charter school Executive Director ("Executive Director" is the title for a charter school's own "superintendent"... they are not part of the HPSD)-- "what do I need to know before choosing to send my child to a charter school?" and they will all say, "you will do more fundraising." The trade-off is the flexibility the charters have, in their curriculum as an example, as they are not governed by the (HPSD) BoE.

There are certain state standardized tests (NJSLA... covering ELA, math, science) that almost all HPSD students must sit for (only 1% is allowed to opt out or it is an automatic "fail"). The results are then aggregated.

Hoboken charter schools, as a rule, have higher aggregated test results than does the HPSD.

Does that mean the charter schools are "better educators"?

It is impossible to compare apples to oranges.

The HPSD has so many children that are truly excelling academically; passing AP courses, receiving merit scholarships to acclaimed universities. It is such an exciting time and such progress from when I moved here 21 years ago.

On the flip side of the coin, the HPSD also has a lot of children that require more resources than average-- far more resources than most charters in town support. Those children are mostly in the HPSD, whether they started in the HPSD, or whether their schools/parents decided their schools were not the right fit for them and then moved them to the HPSD.

Some students' needs are even greater than what the HPSD itself can offer and, when that is the case, the HPSD takes that funding off the top of its budget to pay for their education at a specialized school outside of the district. That expense for this educated-out-of-district-student-population alone was over 3 million dollars last year-- before including the cost of transportation to out-of-district schools and the cost of associated services (ex. speech therapies, summer programs-- as many require 12 month schooling). Remaining in our HPSD we also have children with severe dyslexia, severe ADHD, high anxiety, social/emotional dysregulation, Down Syndrome, and more. HPSD is there for all of these children-- whether rich, poor, academically gifted, academically disadvantaged, neurotypical, neuroatypical... That's the job of a Public School District. That's the law.

The HPSD educates a truly a diverse population, more diverse than Hoboken itself.

How can charter schools get more funding?

It is super important to call out that TRENTON determines how much a charter school will receive in funding each year, and then directs the HPSD to take that designated amount from HPSD's operating budget and distribute it to each charter school.

But does that mean nothing can be done?

1. All three candidates of the Leadership that Listens slate (2-3-4) have PUBLICLY COMMITTED that they would PARTNER with the charter schools' Boards of Trustees (for HoLa, HCS, and Elysian) to lobby Trenton TOGETHER and fight for more state funding for education. Personally, if there is one person I want to enlist on my team when it comes to litigation -- but really, for just about anything-- it is Leslie Norwood. She is the voice of reason and a litigator with the strongest of moral codes. This is exactly who I want fighting for more funding on behalf of every child in the Hoboken public school system, both HPSD and Charter alike. If she had a seat on the BoE, she would have a voice into Trenton.

She is a respected professional and a woman who gets things done. As a mother of two children with Learning Differences, she lobbied tirelessly to bring specialized teacher training to HPSD teachers for years and we are all now benefitting from her advocacy. The HPSD is now deep into training teachers in the Orton-Gillingham method (a multi-sensory method of teaching children with dyslexia as well as typical learners).

2. There has been much talk about PILOTS (payments in lieu of taxes). All candidates have come out against PILOTS, which ultimately pay money directly to the city, thereby skipping the portion of property taxes that would otherwise be earmarked for the schools. Every parent of both HPSD and charter schools would see their schools financially benefit if PILOTS stopped being allowed. I definitely would feel more hopeful knowing Leslie was fighting in the trenches against these deals being further cut between developers and the city.
3. As a sidebar, for ANY school district (including charters) that has been looking for more appropriate infrastructure, Leslie Norwood has also been alerting parents and non-parents alike to fill out the city surveys regarding the redevelopment of the area by the CVS on lower Washington Street. ANY school district (and Hoboken has 4 districts... the HPSD, HoLa, HCS, and Elysian) can apply for consideration for use of this space. "Schools" were not listed as a choice on the city survey, but you could still write it in (I certainly did). Elect someone who seeks out realistic alternatives, who wants what is best for the greater good. If you want a dog park there, vote for a dog park. If you think we need a school, write in a school.

Separately, the Hudson Connect project broke ground on October 5th-- with plans to add 389 residential units (with 20% dedicated as affordable housing) here in Hoboken, and no plan to address the already overcrowded HPSD.

Having options -- what is right for the greater good?

I believe in making decisions to effect the greater good.

Whether or not Hoboken ever improves the infrastructure of our HPSD, those trustees (the BoE) that make the decisions about what goes into running a School District should have the very best interest of all of the children in mind.

HPSD, under the guidance of the BoE, has been improving the opportunities and resources for every child in our district for years, and the results are causing more and more families to stay in town and to stay in the HPSD.

That is the very duty of a public school district.

If you exercise your option to put your child in a charter or private (or homeschool), the district will ALWAYS welcome you if you change your mind... or if your situation changes on you.

It is imperative that the HPSD be the absolute best it can be and that the residents of Hoboken support candidates who have been dedicating their time and energy (whether or not they have previously served on the BoE) toward the continual improvement of our HPSD.

What would happen if HPSD started regressing instead of improving?

Having options is a luxury. Many parents in town have options. Many don't.

As a non-poor person, I would still have options for my family. I could even uproot my family and move to a different public school district in NJ or elsewhere, if I had to. But what about the families in town who have no options? Let's look at families who live in the Hoboken Housing Authority or other Hoboken subsidized housing where moving is not an option for them. Let's look at that middle schooler who misses school every third day because his mother has to work and there is an infant at home and her three other kids take turns staying home from school.

What are THEIR options if the HPSSD system tanks?

They don't have options. The HPSSD has to be the best it can be because not everyone can afford other options.

By the way, how do you suppose those same siblings perform on their NJ standardized tests when they miss school every third day?

The candidates of the 2-3-4 Leadership that Listens slate:

It's relevant to highlight that LTL candidates Leslie Norwood and Antonio Grana are NEW BoE candidates, contrary to what the opposition promotes. There is only one incumbent running for office. And even though Leslie and Antonio are newcomers to the BoE campaign, they have walked the talk which has earned my trust. Each has been very active (by way of active volunteer leadership) in the HPSSD for nearly a decade although neither has ever run for BoE.

Leslie has been an active board member of the Hoboken Public Education Foundation (HPEF) - a private volunteer organization which has raised over \$1.5 million in donations from private citizens and businesses (not taxpayer money) to fund important public school initiatives. In order to continue to advance learning during the pandemic, Leslie and the HPEF volunteer group acted swiftly to purchase every single HPSSD student, grade 2 and higher, a personal Chromebook to use both at school and at home. If a family did not have internet, then internet cards were purchased for them also.

She has two children at Brandt elementary school (HPSSD) here in Hoboken.

The HPEF volunteer group also finances field trips for HPSSD students and college tour trips for Hoboken High School (HPSSD) students.

Antonio Grana, while also new to the BoE campaign, has been very involved in the HPSSD for 9 years, starting at a grassroots level, when his daughter entered Connors elementary school (HPSSD). Connors elementary (HPSSD) in southwest Hoboken did not always have a PTO. Antonio saw the need, and took action. Starting and maintaining a PTO is no easy feat. Connors elementary PTO thrives today. Antonio is now a member of Hoboken Middle School PTO (HPSSD grades 6-8), as his daughter is currently in the 6th grade there.

Antonio does not shrink from hard work and a challenge. Regarding this election being so contentious, Antonio put it very plainly at the debate. He said, "I'm grateful for these challenging conversations. They made us better."

Alex De La Torre has been an HPSSD parent for 13 years. His daughters are now in Hoboken High School and Hoboken Middle School (both HPSSD). He has been actively involved in the HPSSD since his oldest daughter entered Prek-3.

All three candidates on the LTL 2-3-4 slate have kept their children in, and worked to improve, the HPSSD for all of their years in the HPSSD.

Why elect an entire slate? Why not mix and match? What about diversity of thought?

As much as I want to only comment about the positive attributes of 2-3-4 Leadership that Listens slate, I keep hearing cries for "diversity of thought" on the BoE and I feel I must address.

"Diversity of thought" sounds wonderful, in theory, and I firmly believe the three people who are the most trustworthy, knowledgeable, even-tempered, and capable of critical thinking and rational decision-making should be chosen, no matter their political affiliation (BoE elections are supposed to be non-partisan anyway), as long as they have the best interest of Hoboken's children as their driving force.

LTL 2-3-4 chose 3 members for their slate that all reflects those values, in my opinion. KF chose otherwise.

The 2-3-4 slate became a "slate" because they have like-minded values. Their values, both individually and as a group, most-closely represent my own.

The LTL 2-3-4 slate:

- Has praised Dr Johnson for her efforts and execution to keep our kids learning in a safe environment during the pandemic. We are starting to see the results of this, and it is believed that HPSD has shown less learning loss than many other state districts, presumably due to the ability to keep our schools in session. This has been my personal experience observing my children as well.
- Each 2-3-4- candidate filled out the Moms Demand Action Gun Sense Candidate Survey. All three of them received the Gun Sense Candidate distinction.
 - A summary of their responses from the debate:
"What do you think our school district could do to improve violence prevention and safety policies, if anything at all?"
- **Leslie Norwood** acknowledged that what has happened around the country can (and has) happened here in NJ (Vineland school district closed late September due to social media threats).

She took the Moms Demand Action Gun Sense Candidate Survey where she learned how the BoE can support safe schools and reduce gun violence. She earned the Gun Sense Candidate distinction.

Her same volunteer group (HPEF) has funded Rachel's Challenge, implemented this year at the HPSD -- a social/emotional program to increase kindness, reduce bullying, and has been proven to reduce violence in schools, including gun violence. She added: much of gun violence is self-inflicted and social and emotional learning is critical to ensure the safety of our children. It is important to support all of our students with their emotional well-being. (specific actions taken and proposed)
- **Antonio Grana**, also took the Gun Sense Candidate Survey and earned his Gun Sense Candidate Distinction.

He met with Hoboken Police Department to make sure that all School Resource Officers that are in schools are there to understand potential conflicts so that they can be proactive. (specific actions taken and proposed)
- **Alex De La Torre**, also took the Moms Demand Action Gun Sense Candidate Survey, and earned the Gun Sense Candidate Distinction as well.

He shared that he and his slate met with Chief Ferrante of the Hoboken Police Department who "spoke glowingly about the care and investment that Superintendent Dr. Christine Johnson has made to ensure our children's safety." (specific actions taken)

The KF slate formed a slate for the same reasons, presumably, because they have like-minded values. By contrast, their values do not reflect my own, and I do not think they reflect the majority of Hoboken's values.

Members of the KF slate:

- Chose to lobby Dr. Superintendent Christine Johnson to go against both a state health mandate and a public health policy, during a pandemic- this demonstrates to me a lack of responsibility and care outside of the candidate's personal interests.
- Chose to publicly disparage Superintendent Dr. Johnson on a very controversial Facebook page (NJ Fresh Faced Schools... a page that is very much both anti-masking and anti-acceptance of LGBTQ+ youth) and called the parents in Hoboken "sheep" for following health mandates. This was not one "anecdotal" post before realizing what this site represents. She is a PROLIFIC poster on this site, and Dr. Johnson has more than once been the subject of her disdain.
- Chose against taking the Moms Demand Action Gun Sense Candidate Survey. The entire KF slate chose against taking it. Not one of them received the Gun Sense Candidate distinction. Sidebar: Pat Waiters also chose against taking the survey and did not earn the distinction.
 - Here are detailed questions and answers from the debate:
"What do you think our school district could do to improve violence prevention and safety policies, if anything at all?"
- **Pavel** announced that he believed in common sense gun control in NJ and he pledges to do "everything I can to pass legislation to protect our students" (no specific actions taken or proposed).

- **Cindy** said that we "want our kids safe and should address mental health; that we need a program for people feeling lonely" (no specific actions taken or proposed).
- **Donna** is grateful that her son can actively participate in drills (I, unfortunately, can relate to this). And... thinks we should "continue to support and invest in any and all school safety." (Ugh, what does that even mean? No specific actions taken or proposed)
- Changed their FB name from "Vote No on January 25th" to "Kids First Hoboken." There are screenshots reflecting this timeline.

This is their platform for improving the HPSD...? Lobbying against improving a district's educational infrastructure?

- Led a very disrespectful campaign regarding the referendum back in January 2022.
 - Whether someone voted YES or NO to that vote (always their prerogative), my kids should not be subject to grown men shouting "PUBLIC SCHOOL SUCKS" in their faces and mine as they are holding my hand, walking into their school-- a place they know as their safe zone outside of home. That this happened, to any child, is unforgivable.
 - Led a group that parked a truck outside of Hoboken public housing on Election Day in January with a billboard that anti-factually read, "your rent will go up" even though those residents were unequivocally protected.

Whether Pavel or Cindy or Donna physically parked that truck- they have aligned themselves with that group. Pavel proudly called himself the Leader of it.
- ADMITTED at the debate that the HPSD has both capacity and facilities needs... but that the referendum was really rolled out badly (yes, it was) and that's why he led the opposition against it (I disagree... a civic-minded citizen and critical thinker who really cares about "kids first" would weigh the pros and cons and then make a decision based off of that pro/con list).

This plays out, to me, as cutting off the children's noses to spite their parents' faces.

This is saying to children that since I don't like how your parents handled it, I'm going to withhold/punish you instead.

Doesn't that sound like the *opposite* of "kids first"?

I don't trust someone that vindictive to be making choices about children.. any children.

I can only draw my own conclusions. I read that as a disease of Power.

Their slate does not represent my values.

A few days ago, I randomly ran into an old friend and current HPSD high school teacher that I haven't seen in a few years. She asked who I was voting for. She said that she reached out to every candidate and that 2-3-4 (Leslie Norwood, Antonio Grana, Alex De la Torre) were the only candidates who responded to her.

Before you run for a position to govern the educations and well-being of 3000+ innocent school children, prove your worth.

Show me you care.

Show me you have worked for the children of Hoboken before you campaign about how you can be helpful.

Be helpful first.

I urge everyone to think about the greater good.

Vote 2-3-4 on Nov 8th.