

By Chris Neidenberg

The board of education's conduct, charter schools and the co-location of Snyder and Innovation high schools were among some issues three tickets and two individual candidates politely discussed at an Oct. 6 forum, at Rafael De J. Cordero School No. 37.

The Hamilton Park Neighborhood Association (HPNA) sponsored the forum. It lasted about two hours before an audience of about 60 in the Downtown school's auditorium off Erie Street.

Moderator Marc Isikoff asked about 10 questions, his own, and some from the audience. The candidates also made brief opening and closing statements during the roughly two-hour session while seated on the stage.

Two tickets, each with three candidates, are basically posturing themselves as either being critical or supportive of Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles.

The supportive Jersey City United slate features former HNPNA President Matt Schapiro, minister Luis Felipe Fernandez and college student Asmaa Abdalla, a Lincoln High School graduate.

The critical Education Matters ticket, endorsed by the JCEA and various city Democrat organizations, features three-time candidate Gina Verdibello, Sudhan Thomas, and looking to make a comeback, former four-term member Angel Valentin, who departed in 2014.

Marketing itself as essentially apolitical, and kind of in the middle is a two-person slate of city high school graduates, and like Abdalla, college students: Mussab Ali (McNair Academic High School) and Kimberly Goyocochea (The Performing Arts Academy at Snyder High School).

The three recent city high school graduates running have injected some young blood into the contest, not seen at least in recent years.

Also participating were parent Natalia Ioffe and Jersey City Kiwanis Club President Mark Rowan, a retired district administrator.

Two other names on the Nov. 8 ballot did not attend: Dominique Lee and Jose Vazquez. A 13th candidate, Dejon Morris, dropped out.

The following consists of comments the candidates made either in response to the questions or during their opening and closing statements in an effort to offer a snapshot on some issues. They are listed alphabetically.

Abdalla - Asked a question relative to if a budget audit should be conducted, the Kean University student seemed sympathetic, claiming that, even with an annual budget in the area of \$660 million, the district falls woefully short of providing certain essentials, given her own recent experiences.

"The problem is not money," said the candidate, who also praised Lyles for producing dramatic increase in the graduation rate and a reduction of the suspension rate. "The problem is the services we lack. As a student in the public schools, there were so many things we lacked, including air conditioning."

She and running mates Schapiro and Fernandez emphasized the need to restore what they

now see as a lack of decorum at board meetings and a badgering of Lyles by her adversaries.

"Just because I disagree with you doesn't mean I'm going to disrespect and berate you," she said.

Abdalla answering a question about concerns over the volume of information the board must analyze so close to meeting time, promised, "I will make time to read these things."

Ali - The college student, who finished in the top tier of his graduating class at McNair, set up for the academically gifted, claimed he and Goyocochea will bring a needed fresh perspective to the board as recent high school grads well aware of the schools' current needs.

And Ali, who claimed students have witnessed first-hand the district's "politics trickling down to the classroom," said he would push hard to end what he sees as the partisan politics currently tainting it.

"The only endorsements we should be seeking are from community leaders and the residents," he said, demanding all candidates endorsed by politicians, "rescind" them.

Further, Ali, along with Abdalla, said board members should not be fretting over the level of materials they must study within a few days of meetings, responding to Isikoff's question dealing with the topic.

"I think it's an issue of time management," he said, insisting he has the intellectual capacity to meet the challenges at hand.

Fernandez - The local Fountain of Salvation church pastor criticized the conduct of some board members recently for their stance in the P.S. 34 naming controversy, where the board ultimately unanimously proposed naming it after President Barack Obama over Board Member Marilyn Roman.

Roman's supporters eventually abandoned the effort. But Fernandez claimed the controversy never should have been, and is indicative of a certain faction being tone deaf to community concerns.

"I was speaking to a child two days after (the vote) and she said, 'I felt I wasn't being heard,'" he said.

Roman's supporters maintained the Obama group seemed to coalesce only after it couldn't get the new Maya Angelou School named after him, when the board member's proponents launched their campaign at least a year ago (she taught at P.S. 34).

Fernandez and his running mates promised to roll up their sleeves and get right to work trying to develop consensus on the board where possible, even with their perceived adversaries.

"One of the things we need (on the board) is respect and understanding," said the pastor, insisting trustees must also serve as positive role models for the children. "We can respect one another. We can work together."

He still acknowledged, "Because we are the second biggest school district in the state, to have everyone think the same way, is not going to happen."

Goyocochea - She echoed Ali's concerns about politics influencing the board, saying board service "is not about Democrats and Republicans. It's about serving the community."

In furthering her promised apolitical philosophy, Goyocochea assured she will take a purely objective approach.

"I think we need to set aside our personal biases," said Goyocochea. "Of course, we have our own points of view."

Dealing with a question on meeting the needs of district buildings, she replied. "Many facilities are under capacity. We need to open our facilities and use all our facilities."

Ioffe - During the discussion of whether the alternative Innovation High School, which draws students citywide via lottery, should be co-located in the historic Snyder facility - a neighborhood high school - Ioffe seemed critical of the arrangement.

"'Excellence and Equity' should not be mutually exclusive, which is what this administration prides itself on," she said. "I think if the goal of excellence is interfering with the sense of equity, it (Innovation's co-location) should be reviewed and reconsidered."

A parent active in a Downtown elementary school, Ioffe told the audience her multi-tasking, working at her mortgage banking job while pursuing an academic degree, also well suits her for meeting the board's often difficult challenges.

"I have the ability to analyze complex text," she said.

Asked about concerns district schools after hours have sometimes been used to serve the needs of particular politicians/political organizations rather than youths and community groups, she pledged to try blocking any alleged future practice when reviewing facility requests.

"It has to benefit the children of the community," she said, "not just be advantageous to one person."

Rowan - In response to the Innovation controversy, Rowan, who noted he is not even sure of the two other candidates he will support, said, "I support alternative education. I support Innovation but I think it's in the wrong location."

Regarding charter schools, even though districts are required to provide minimum funding levels to them while only the state, not the local board, has jurisdiction, he told the audience, "I do support the public schools but I do think parents have a right to make a choice."

And, regarding some school board members' complaints that it receives information on many agenda items only a short time before meetings, Rowan said, "I would have no problem abstaining on a vote if I felt I didn't have enough time to make an intelligent decision."

Schapiro - Perhaps Lyles' strongest supporter in the race, he insisted he, Fernandez and Abdalla will be un-bossed and un-bought giving their refusal, along with Goyocochea and Ali, to accept campaign endorsements.

"We have not asked for the endorsement of elected officials," said Schapiro, a private sector communications consultant with a son enrolled at Cordero. "We have sat down with them and discussed our concerns with elected officials and asked, 'What are your concerns with our public schools?'"

In urging that all board members show a greater respect to Lyles, he used a football analogy, explaining, "The superintendent is like a quarterback. You don't have to support the quarterback all the time, but you do have to run the same plays."

The candidate, who strongly endorsed the co-location of Innovation at Snyder as a proper use of underused space, also defended the current legal arrangement binding city charter schools to the district, at least in terms of funding, even as the board has no say over them.

"I feel providing funds is fair," Schapiro said. "The Jersey City Public Schools' funding officers a lot more auxiliary funding than a charter school, such as for athletics."

Thomas - The candidate, CEO of a financial services company with a two-year-old son, claimed the diversity of his ticket with Verdibello (a parent activist), Valentin (with heavy board and government experience) and himself (finance experience) offers the perfect mix needed for effective board operation.

"We can have a new era of communication and cooperation," he told the audience. "We have just the right experience to effectuate an effective board."

Further, on charter schools, Thomas said his focus on the board will emphasize tending to the needs of the facilities it controls, stating, "We have to fix our public schools in Jersey City. That should be our priority at this point."

Regarding the Innovation/Snyder controversy, the candidate suggested it could be affecting the morale of Snyder's students if they feel at disadvantage due to the situation. Applying Innovation students are chosen at random via lottery - not through entry exams testing knowledge. In contrast, Snyder has been targeted as a school undergoing state intervention to save it.

"We have to create (a sense of) aspiration and we need to fix it (the Innovation/Snyder conflict)," Thomas said.

Valentin - The former city interagency task force chairman and one-time state Superior Court employee, and Verdibello, directly criticized Lyles' procedures in interacting with the board.

On the question concerning if board members are too overwhelmed with information a short time before meetings, he replied, "You get this information on a Friday and you have stuff you have to digest and review. What happens is it's the added stuff you're given on the day of the meeting. That's where we have the problem. That's where communication between board members creates a problem."

Asked if he would support an audit, Valentin agreed, claiming too much funding goes to supporting central office bureaucracy rather than students.

He claimed, "We have more lawyers than the Superior Court of New Jersey. I have a problem with the volume of consultants this district put in the budget - and the number of attorneys."

Regarding Jersey City United's allegations concerning board disharmony, Valentin insisted he has shown he can work with anyone, saying, "You don't need to agree with a person to be able to work with them."

Verdibello - The mother of three district children and city realtor called for the board not to renew Lyles' contract last year. Verdibello offered no apologies for soliciting endorsements, such as the JCEA's.

"Whether I have any endorsements in the district, I put the children of this community first," she said. "I love being endorsed by the JCEA. I worked very hard to get it and I make no apologies for it."

She insisted it was the dedicated commitment of active parents through the years in pressuring the board, not Lyles, who have been primarily responsible for the district's improved performance. And, she complained, Lyles' supporters in the race seem to feel she can be unaccountable to the board.

"She works for the district. She works for us," the candidate said. "At the end of the day, we need to find out why there is information that you're not being told about."

Verdibello cited her constant presence and steady advocacy for city children, whether at the board, or in Trenton, as warranting earning one's vote.

"I know all the board members know who I am," she said. "And, for the most part, I know who they are and spend a lot of time working well with them."