

My name is Antonia Keg and I am in my third year of service on West Chester Parent Teacher Organization Council, comprised of representatives from all 16 schools in our district. In that capacity, I am responsible for disseminating factual information from district administration to representatives in the Council. I regularly attend school board and committee meetings in order to keep PTOC representatives aware of district accomplishments and challenges.

As a parent, I am committed to the cause of public education and do my best to stay aware not only of district-wide education issues but also state and federal issues. I am currently enrolled in a fellowship program through EPLC in Harrisburg that affords me the opportunity to better understand and communicate the impact of federal and state legislation on our local district.

Being an involved parent and community volunteer led me to contemplate school board service as a “next step”. For me, it was the ideal mingling of education advocacy and community service. However, not being affiliated with either political party in my county, I was realistic in my chances of being elected as an Independent.

Regardless, I was a frequent visitor to the “How to Run for School Board” section of the PSBA website and investigated through Voter Services just how to gain access to the ballot as an Independent. As a voter, I was especially concerned about the lack of choices in the upcoming November 2011 school board election. Due to an assignment of a vacated term, six seats were up in that election.

I continued my research by reaching out to others in the community who had served on the board or attempted to run for school board director in the past. Ex-board members were encouraging, recounting that board service was one of the best and most rewarding experiences of their lives. Not as encouraging was the process of getting on the ballot. One needed party endorsement and my belief that an Independent had little chance of winning in our county was affirmed. The most realistic plan of action for me would be to choose a party and attempt to gain their endorsement. Local party committee people endorsed candidates and that process was dependent on many factors. I was strongly encouraged to cross-file also in order to secure the numerous “straight party” votes. With enough on my plate and admittedly finding the entire process discouraging, over-complicated and a bit misleading to voters, I put aside my thoughts of school board service, knowing I could and would continue to advocate for quality and equitable public education through various volunteer and community alliances.

We are fortunate in West Chester Area School District. We enjoy the leadership of a committed administration who involves the community in the decision-making process.

Through the use of community task forces open to all district residents, the district has enacted both revenue-generating and cost-saving measures, demonstrating its commitment to being fiscally responsible while maintaining the educational integrity of programs. District employees and administrators agreed to a wage freeze last year and our community continues to work together to save millions through such measures as changing transportation routes, consolidating administrative positions, and most recently, instituting a “pay-to-play” system.

In the spring of 2011, the West Chester Area School Board voted against a tax increase, citing the difficult economic times experienced by many residents in the district. Many residents spoke at the June Board meeting where that vote was taken. Some were concerned that money was taken from the district fund balance in lieu of a slight tax increase. Others feared a decrease in the market values of their homes if the school district began to cut programs and lose its excellent academic standing. Still others expressed gratitude to the board for a year with no tax increase. We became a divided community and much of the behavior exhibited by adults on all sides of the debate provided poor examples to students in our district.

For me, the one positive consequence of that division was the attention drawn to the position of school board director. Many turned their attention to the upcoming election in November and began to question not only the role/responsibilities of school board directors but the process of getting on the ballot. West Chester VOTE (Voters Open To Education) initially formed in response to this community “disconnect”, and pledged to keep the community informed and engaged in local board decisions. Their non-partisan pro-public education mission (Attachment 1) received overwhelmingly positive response. With community encouragement and support, and with less than six months to the election, VOTE waged an extraordinary six-candidate write-in campaign for school board election in November 2011. I was privileged to be one of those candidates.

We were Republican, Democrat and Independent, but as write-ins, we did not identify ourselves with party labels, but rather a common pro-public education mission shared by all of us. We knew our chances of winning were slim to none, but in addition to wanting to serve on the school board, we all viewed this as an opportunity to alert people to the benefit of removing party politics from the office of school board director and making choices based on candidate qualifications, not party affiliations. As write-ins, we were excluded from participation in traditional forums, debates and the voter’s guide due to by-laws of the hosting organizations. In addition, an entire party slate of six candidates on the ballot wrote an open letter to the community (Attachment 2). In it, they explained their refusal to attend any forum that would host candidates “not on the ballot”. Citing their lack of time due to other commitments, those six candidates publicly dismissed the write-ins, accusing us of showing “disrespect” to the electoral process. Their letter

continued to falsely accuse us of not filing campaign finance reports, something each of us did in a timely manner. For me, the most interesting part of this open letter was their assertion that some of them were even “nominated” by both political parties, i.e., they cross-filed, for it affirmed the earlier advice I received from past board candidates about those crucial “straight party” votes.

But in the end, as write-ins, we did enjoy healthy discussion throughout the campaign with the two other candidates on the ballot who accepted all invitations to meet with us in public forums. We also held many our own forums and spoke to any group that would host us. We were humbled by the outpouring of community support for our efforts. Volunteers distributed flyers and posted lawn signs, doing everything humanly possible to familiarize people with our names and the fact that they did have choices for the office of school board director in November.

In November 2011, West Chester voters were provided the unique opportunity to write in up to six diverse pro- public education candidates. The write-in campaign garnered approximately 40,000 votes: 40,000 voters taking the time to write in a variety of names, 40,000 people on one day saying “yes”, not only to candidates concerned about the educational system as the foundation of our community, but “yes” to our attempt to remove party politics from our local school board elections. One write-in candidate did gain enough votes and now sits on the school board. Not surprisingly, the candidates on the ballot who garnered the most overall votes cross-filed.

So ends my story of attempting to gain a school board position in a truly non-partisan, “independent” manner. I am most grateful to have had the opportunity to enlighten so many people not only to the process of how we elect our school board but also to the decisive role a board member plays in the community. My biggest “win” was the privilege of getting to know my fellow write-ins during the campaign. A school board of directors, or any voting body, is healthiest when comprised of diverse voices. What was so powerful about the six of us, as write-ins, was our differences. We were all truly distinguishable voices, yet we came together with a common vision of the need for a strong public education system as a foundation of a strong and economically sound community.

As a footnote to my story, I must confess that in the past few months, I have indeed chosen a political side. Sadly, my write-in experience did make me surrender to the realization that Independents, at least in my community, cannot affect true change through the political process. So, in hopes of becoming part of the candidate endorsement process, I recently ran in the primary for a committee woman position in my precinct, but was unsuccessful this time.

In closing, my primary request of you today is to ask you to give serious thought to what defines an excellent school board candidate and how best to ensure such candidates can

gain access to the ballot. School board directors should be chosen on their commitment to maintaining a strong educational system that ensures a community's continued success and growth, not on their affiliation with a particular political party. As voters, we should be encouraged to choose the best and most qualified individuals for those positions and not be limited to the choices of local political party endorsements. The process of getting on the ballot outlined in SB 327 is a critical first step, not only in encouraging quality and committed school board candidates, but also in providing voters with real choices. I believe SB 327 could, in the long run, help combat voter apathy by empowering voters to investigate who they are electing to stewardship of their local tax dollars. Now, more than ever, with our Governor encouraging us to go to our local boards for answers and explanation, we need to insure that those boards consist of committed, open-minded, rational problem-solvers able to enforce the vital connection between a strong school district and a financially sound community.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and also to your commitment to service on the Education Committee.

## **Attachment 1:**

From: [www.westchestervote.org](http://www.westchestervote.org)

### **We Believe:**

- **Our school board should never be used by party politicians to promote an anti-public education agenda.**
- **We must preserve music, athletics, art, drama, and other enrichment programs.**
- **Teachers profoundly impact our children's lives and should be valued.**
- **District employees should participate in creating solutions to economic hardships.**
- **Fiscal responsibility and accountability are essential.**
- **Quality public schools protect our communities, our local economy, and our property values.**
- **Education is an investment in the strength and endurance of our country.**

West Chester VOTE will continue its grassroots advocacy for a sustained standard of educational excellence in West Chester Area School District. We will inspire parents and taxpayers to become active participants in the district's decision-making process by creating an awareness of the economic, societal, and human costs of permitting party politics to set the agenda for our public school system. We will continue to promote committed nonpartisan school board candidates who share this vision. This is clearly in the best interest of all students, the community and our collective future.

**Attachment 2:**

Below is the complete public statement issued by the six candidates:

<http://westchester.patch.com/articles/endorsed-school-board-candidates-will-not-debate-write-in-candidates>

*The Republican nominees for West Chester Area School District (Karen Miller, Vince Murphy, Galen Plona, Linda Raileanu, Maureen Snook, and Ed Coyle) have received three requests for debates or "Meet the Candidates" events. Our time is limited and our schedules are already busy with campaign commitments, our jobs, our duties as parents, and serving on the budget task force committees.*

*Because of this, we will not be participating in any debates that include candidates who are not on the ballot. We began the electoral process in January by interviewing with the Republican Committee members to gain their endorsement. We went through the Primary Election, in which the Republican and Democrat voters chose their nominees. Some of us were elected as nominees of both political parties. We have been taking our message to the voters for the last 9 months and will continue to do so until the General Election on November 8.*

*Non-partisan candidates had until August 1 to get their names on the ballot for November, and none have done so. We conclude that anyone who claims to be a candidate but does not have his/her name on the ballot is either unaware of or is not respectful of the election process. We question whether they are truly concerned about education or are merely reacting to a school board vote that they did not like. One cannot enter a marathon at Mile 23 and expect to be on the same footing as those who have been in it from the start.*

*Further, we were required to file financial disclosure documents in order to get our names on the ballot, and have continued to file periodic campaign finance reports since the beginning of our candidacy. Anyone who does not have his/her name on the ballot has not been similarly vetted could have questionable sources of funds.*

*Because anyone can declare him/herself to be a write-in candidate, there could be dozens of candidates in any given debate, which would be confusing to the voters and lead to an unwieldy, disorganized mess.*

*We are available for debates with other candidates on the ballot (i.e., Wayne Burton and Ted Diehl), as we have been since the beginning of our candidacy.*

*Respectfully,*

*Ed Coyle*

*Karen Miller*

*Vince Murphy*

*Galen Plona*

*Linda Raileanu*

*Maureen Snook*

