

Remarks – Montclair Board of Education May 4th, 2015

Shelly Lombard

Thank Stephen and my kids because I ran out the door many Monday nights, leaving them to fend for themselves on dinner and homework

Thank my mother and my friends for their patience when I didn't have time to return their emails or phone calls.

Thank all the people who supported the schools by volunteering their time on the PTA, coming to events, donating money.

When I started on the BOE, 9 years ago:

- Good administration
- But stubborn problems
- Peace but no progress
- Central office perception – whether true or not, was perceived as a place where failed administrators who had managed to get tenure went to serve out their days until retirement
- Woeful technology
- One of strongest BA's in state but financials were not user friendly and we had insufficient management reporting;
- We had schools that were good but not great and that didn't work for everyone.
- Runaway taxes. Taxes rose 4% or more every year. That might be a nuisance for someone in a million dollar house but if it causes a landlord to raise the rent, that might be an unbearable burden for a poor family

Looking back at my 9 years on the Board, what I am proudest of? I am proudest of how we as a community reacted when we were facing a financial crisis in 2010.

- On the verge of losing \$5 million of state aid and a possible charter school
- But we came together as a community to look for solutions.
- Harvey Susswein, Pam Jenkins, Diane Walpole, Carol Ewertsen, Bo Foley, Chris Swenson, and David Lagasse. And people like Cary Chevat and Andrew Gideon who had been very critical of the Board worked together to prepare for a crisis.
- Definitely had controversy:
 - Had to consider closing a school.
 - But we were sitting there with a brand new \$25mn school that had 10 empty classrooms
 - It would be crazy not to consider merging schools
- BUT even people who disagreed were coming to the mic with solutions: selling

- bracelets; doing a sale leaseback of 22 Valley Road
- Dodged a bullet; crisis was averted because we didn't lose our state aid and the charter school application failed
- But all that focus on financials and the surplus enabled us to hold taxes flat for 3 years during the worst economic period in this country since the great depression.

What has been my biggest disappointment? My biggest disappointment is that our schools are performing about the same way they were 9 years ago.

- Montclair is a strong school district in a state that has the best schools in the country. But this country is now below average when compared with the rest of the world. We're good. But everyone else has gotten better.
- And no, we do not have failing schools. But we are definitely failing some of our students.
- One of the reasons we hired Penny MacCormack is because she believed in setting high standards for all students.
- She walked in and said to the Board "I want to close the achievement gap and you can hold me accountable for doing it"
- And she had "receipts". She had a track record of narrowing an achievement gap in Hartford.
- But before she introduced the strategic plan or even uttered the words, "common assessment" or "PARCC", I got a nasty email from someone complaining that she was white and a woman. That person later became one of her fiercest critics,.
- People complained about her certification, and that she got her PhD from the Broad Academy, which is sponsored by the Broad Foundation by the way
- When she created the achievement gap panel, people were quick to criticize the people who were on it, where were the recommendations...
- For all the people who were complaining, let me ask you....where were you for the last nine years when nothing was getting done?
 - One or 2 people like Kelly Sweat, James Harris, and Renee Baskerville came regularly to ask what we were doing about the achievement gap.
 - Other than that you could throw a brick in here and not hit a soul.
 - Like I said, peace but no progress.

What am I most concerned about? That we will go back to being content with the status quo...business as usual.

Five years from now, will the top half of MHS' graduating class still be almost all white while the bottom half is almost all black?

- We have let a small group of people convince the people whose kids are in the bottom half that we should just keep doing the same thing that we've been doing for the last 20 years ...that the status quo is working....we just need to do more of

the same. The ironic thing is that those people who are so protective of the status quo have absolutely no skin in the game...their kid graduated 20 years ago or their kid is in the top half of the class and headed to Swarthmore. The status quo is working for them.

- There are also some that claim that the achievement gap doesn't matter because the children at the bottom are mainly poor....that we don't have a responsibility to children whose parents don't come to Board of Ed or PTA meetings ... that they don't matter?

Are we committed to improving the quality of instruction for all children?

- While most of the teachers my kids have had have been excellent, I know that every parent hasn't had the same experience. I know every teacher is a hard-working teacher but not every teacher is an effective teacher.
- Teaching is too hard a job for 100% of the people to be doing it well. If you drive on the turnpike during rush hour, you know everybody can't drive.
- If everybody can't do something easy like drive, why do we think anybody we put in the classroom can do something really hard like teach?
- I know that the new central services is unpopular because people don't like having more teacher evaluations and different professional development.
- But struggling teachers can't get better if they're only observed and evaluated a few times a year or those evaluations are superficial.
 - And we can't provide good professional development unless we observe teachers and know what they're struggling with, like classroom management or differentiated instruction?
 - I'm sorry but courses like Yoga for Teachers like we've had in the past just don't cut it. They treat the symptoms, not the problem.
 - And yes, smaller class size would be great. But that will take more space and more personnel. Let's work on improving what we're already doing before we add tens of millions of dollars to the budget.

Are we willing to make hard decisions or are we more interested in appeasing adults than taking care of the children who go to school in our town?

- Last year, other than plumbers, electricians, and speech therapists, we spent less than \$2 million on consultants and lawyers and a few million on technology.
- But we spent \$80 million on salaries and benefits.
- Clearly, legal fees, technology, consultants are the tail. Salaries and benefits are the dog.

- I have always voted yes to teacher raises. And I voted to add kindergarten teachers and more SAC's and to restore world language.
- Like most people in this town, I am willing to spend money on education. But people want the Board to spend their money wisely.
- We have the same special ed population as South Orange but we have 100 more aides than they do. That is \$4.5 million.
- That's money that could be spent on more guidance counselors. We need them, especially at the middle and high school level.
- That's money that could be spent on pre-K. I don't think we're going to close the achievement gap without it. I am not talking about a few scholarships to the Montclair Pre-k but a broader solution that includes the historically black pre-k's in town whose parents want breakfast programs and reasonably priced after care.
- But this year, instead of acknowledging that we might not need 100 more aides than South Orange has, we restored most of those positions.

So we appeased the adults who were screaming about jobs for aides. Board meetings will be peaceful...but will we have any progress?

I am disappointed that we have gotten sidetracked discussing irrelevant stuff like who's on the agenda and what order they speak in.

I am disappointed that we let people divide our town by accusing others of corporatizing education while they take hundreds of thousands of dollars from people like Leona Helmsley and Deutsch Bank.

I am disappointed that we allowed people, people who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo because of their day jobs, their anti-charter school books and their anti-ed reform speaking tours, make our children collateral damage while they advance a national or state political agenda?

A few years ago, a friend of mine who was a teacher told me she was working on starting a charter school. This is someone I respected...someone who was a great teacher. I still meet her former students today and they tell me she changed their lives. That teacher was Gayl Shepard.

I told her that I didn't think a charter school would work in Montclair...no money, no space...but I had so much respect for her as an educator...that I figured if she thought we should be doing something different, then maybe we should be doing something different. Plus, we all know Gayl by now, I knew I couldn't stop her anyway.

So I introduced her to Norm Atkins of Uncommon Schools so she could get some advice from someone who ran a successful charter school. Norm did not meet with her and for

whatever reason, her charter school never came to fruition.

But I respected the fact that a teacher that I respected was concerned enough about children to consider something that was actually controversial for a teacher to consider.

Nothing in our schools has changed since that time. The concerns that motivated Gayl a few years ago are still concerns today. I don't support a charter school in Montclair, but we should be honest enough with ourselves to say that the status quo...peace without progress...is unacceptable.

I want to close by thanking some of the best board members I ever worked with.....Leslie Larson, Deb Wilson, Robin Kulwin, Tanya Coke, Angelica Allen-MacMillan, Norm Rosenbloom, Shirley Grill, David Deutsch, and Rob Kautz.

Even when we disagreed, there were no political agendas, no playing to the audience. People were willing to engage honestly.

I challenge the Board members that I am leaving behind to be leaders whose only loyalty is only to the people who live here, pay taxes here, and go to school here in Montclair...nobody else.

Leaders who are not content to romanticize what Montclair used to be but are instead leading Montclair to what it needs to be and can be.