

Bryan Burrell

1) In recent years, the school district has annually proposed budget increases greater than inflation, and has actually proposed bond issues to finance regular spending (not new capital spending). What do you think of this approach to financial management?

The unfair burden that has been placed on property tax payers to fund education must be changed. Ever increasing property taxes are a dagger at the heart of public education and our children. New York is number one when it comes to property taxes. No other state has a property tax burden greater than we do. Our state income tax burden ranks in the middle of the 50 states. Over time our state has increased its reliance on the property tax to fund education and local government.

A study recently conducted by the Rockland County School Board's Association showed that unfunded and under funded mandates make up over 26% of the school budget. Additionally, a study recently presented to the New York State property tax commission showed that pension costs have risen 210% over the past 5 years. It also showed that health insurance costs have shot up by 51% over the same time period.

I think it is important to examine both our voter approved budget and the contingent or "austerity" budget which can be approved without voter authorization. The contingent or austerity budget for a school district is defined by the state of NY as 120% of the national CPI (Consumer Price Index). School districts in New York are required to use the national CPI. Our region has its own price index which is called the Regional CPI. The regional CPI is almost always greater than the national CPI.

The CPI measures what a determined basket of goods and services costs at a certain point in time. Our school budget is primarily composed of programs and people. If a school district goes on an austerity budget, the impact is most significant on the programs and the people.

The Nyack School district's budget to budget increases have been, on average, around \$700,000.00 over the contingent or austerity budget. This comprises just over 1% of the tax levy increase.

The school district received voter approval for a capital project on the Old High School. The proposed bond would have also been for capital projects, as defined by the state of New York. When the district uses a capital project to finance replacement of roofs and other capital work it receives state aid because it is a capital project. Our state aid for approved capital projects is just over 36 cents on the dollar.

We must always continue to sharpen our pencils and find cost savings so that the district continues to be run in a fiscally responsible manner. I would welcome the opportunity to speak with anyone regarding these issues. By working together, we can provide taxpayers with the relief they so desperately need.

2) For many years, the Nyack school district has been operating with annual expense increases about doubling the rate of inflation. Do you consider this a problem? If so, what would you do about it?

I have already answered part of this question above. The difference between a contingent or austerity budget and a voter approved budget is not that significant. It represents just over 1% on the tax levy. There is a great deal that we can do about the COSTS that drive school budgets.

We must work for property tax relief by advocating for a fair tax plan that reduces the unfair reliance on the property tax to fund public education.

We must work with the state and federal governments to reduce and eliminate unfunded and under funded mandates. My work as executive director of the Rockland County School Board's Association, combined with my membership and involvement in the National School Board's Association's Federal Relations Network, and the New York State School Board's Association's State Legislative Network has been instrumental in driving this point home in both Albany and Washington. Some of the advocacy work and studies can be found at [www.rcsba.org](http://www.rcsba.org). We all need to advocate. I have actively and successfully lobbied Washington and Albany for millions of dollars for the district.

We must seek out and obtain grants for some of our programs. Under my leadership the district has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants. For more information: [www.bburrell.org](http://www.bburrell.org) or call me at 914-714-8577.

3) With the known ongoing gang involvement in the middle and high schools of the Nyack school district, what do you envision the part of the school board, administration, teachers and parents in the addressing of this issue.....other than budgetary concerns, as a resident of Nyack, I view this a major problem that needs be addressed and in an intelligent way.....a way that will show results and keep the community involved and have the school accept its responsibility as the

"educator".....this a question to be addressed by all and hopefully is presented for reply and not just determined of no interest....the candidates must be asked and respond intelligently as the children in your care are our future....

We must all come together as a community to learn from the past and use all the tools and resources we have to address the problem. I have spoken extensively with personnel from the three police departments involved. I have also been engaged in conversations with members of the community. I have to underscore that our schools are safe. According to Det. Tim O'Neill, our high school is one of the safest around. He has been impressed with our security staff and procedures.

There are students that attend both the high school and the middle school that are either in a gang or are affiliated with a gang. Our security staff is ever vigilant and watchful. Did you know that on certain days, the wearing of an I Love NY tee-shirt is a statement of gang affiliation? Our Middle school principal, Ms. Saieva knows that and even more. We all need that measure of knowledge and awareness. Education will bring that to everyone.

The school district is part of the community. Each part of the community has a role and a responsibility in combating this problem. Our teachers will once again receive some professional development in the awareness area. We need to work together so that we create positive change, one life at a time. We need to coordinate with community groups, have a more focused conversation on the issue and take it very seriously. I know you are concerned about this. I hope you will call me so we can talk some more.

There is no question that there is a need for more programming for our youth after school and on weekends. Working together, we can make a difference. I take the issue seriously and will commit my time, effort and energy to help our kids.

4) What do you consider to be more important- lower taxes or a better educational system? Choose only one, please.

I have identical twin daughters. If they were both in a burning building, I could not choose to save one and not the other. We must do both. There will always be taxes in one form or another. The real problem, from my view, is the crushing property tax burden that continues to increase. This unfair reliance on the property tax to fund education must be changed.

At the same time, and just as critically important, we simply must prepare the young people of our community so that they can compete in a global

marketplace. Education is the key to our future, our children's future and the future of this great nation.

Hypotheticals that pit one segment of the community against another serve no good purpose from my point of view. We can have a greater impact by working together to build consensus and community alliances to address problems.

5) Why do you want to be on the school board?

I want this district to keep its focus on each and every one of our students. If we lose our focus or misplace it, our community's children will be impacted. My passion for all of the children of this district remains very much intact. I have done my best to reach out to all parts of the community and engage them in the ongoing process of change and improvement. We have come a long way. We have a long way to go. I think my experience and my record of effective advocacy will be assets to the board and the district.

I am a strong advocate for academic excellence in the district. We are doing well in so many areas but there is still a lot of work that is yet to be done. We need to challenge all of our kids to reach their highest potential. The path to excellence must be focused on mastery and nothing less. I believe that my 20 years of Catholic School teaching experience will continue to assist me in the oversight work of a board member.

I want to continue to encourage increased parental involvement, effective communication and inclusiveness. I will continue to work on improving communication with all of the community. I will continue to give all district residents my personal cell phone number so that I can continue to listen and learn.

I want to continue to advocate for improved technology. The technological tools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be part of the everyday experience of both students and teachers. I spearheaded a district wide focus on technology resulting in computers in every classroom and LCD projectors in 75% of district classrooms. I have served on the district's technology committee since its inception. As a private school technology coordinator, I know firsthand the value of technological tools to increase and enhance student learning and achievement.

6) What new or changed initiatives would you support at the middle and high school level to combat gang activity, especially given recent events at Nyack High School and in the community?

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7) What if any specific improvements would you advocate for on the elementary school level to better challenge and meet the needs of academically advanced students?

We must challenge all of our students to reach their highest potential. Challenging our high flyers can be achieved successfully if we invest in quality professional development that results in a differentiation of instruction that causes every boat to rise. We must bring enrichment into the classroom and can do that in significant ways through the use of 21<sup>st</sup> century technological tools. We can continue our MAC and looping programs which are models of differentiation and provide for the needs of every learner. Additionally, we can continue to allow both the research and best practice to inform our efforts.

8) Would you support another bond proposal to fund capital improvements in the school district? If so, what changes would you propose from the last bond proposal and how would you make the bond more palatable to voters?

I made mistakes during the bond discussion. If I had it to do over again, I would certainly do things differently. The word intense and the word passion are synonyms. I regret that the passion I have for kids and this district was more intense than it should have been. My wife is the first person to admit that I am not perfect. I have learned a great deal from the experience and I am still listening. Given my mistakes, I am the last person who should be providing insights on another bond.

9) Head Start is a great success. It helps even the playing field for all children. Do you see evening the playing field for all children as a priority in our schools? If so, how do you think we can help the schools better achieve this?

Head Start is a great success. I have always been a strong proponent of early childhood education. I serve on the executive committee of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Collaborative for Children and Youth and lobby and advocate for more Pre-K money as Executive Director of RCSBA.

We must lead all children to excellence. Every child must be given the ability to reach their highest potential. We must look at every child as an individual and do our best to understand their varying learning styles and needs. We have a responsibility to raise the floor for all of our students. At the same time, we must challenge those who are ready for more. And while we are doing that work we also need to make sure that the kids in the middle also get the challenge they need.

We need to have real universal pre-K. By investing in the early years, we will save money and do what's best for children at the same time.

We need to enhance and target our professional development. Our district has been doing this but we still have work to do. Differentiation of instruction is essential if we are going to meet the needs of different students with multiple learning styles and needs. We need to examine our data to see what we are doing well and to also see what we need to improve and change. Success is a journey, not a destination. I would love to talk to anyone at length regarding my thoughts and experiences in this area.

10) How do you see the School Board interacting with the Schools' Superintendent?

The school board is responsible for making policy. The superintendent is hired by the board and is evaluated by the board. The policy making role of the board is critical because it is not the job of the board to micromanage the day to day operations of the district. The board and the superintendent should be a

leadership, governance team. Communication is essential from the board to the superintendent and from the superintendent to the board.

11) What is your position on the effectiveness of school uniforms in promoting a more disciplined student body, and in leveling the playing field in a district with such broad range of incomes?

I taught in a Catholic school for over 20 years so I know a thing or two about school uniforms. I have heard parents advocate for and against uniforms in my years on the board. On more than one occasion, our district's legal counsel has informed the board about the legal questions surrounding required school uniforms. We have consistently been told that the district cannot legally require a student to wear a school uniform. In this instance, the law informs the conversation.

12) I've heard that over 75% of the annual budget is devoted to staff and administrative costs. That doesn't leave a lot of room for new programs without significant tax increases.

a) Do you have any ideas about decreasing costs without hurting educational programs?

b) Would you support formation of a committee, composed of business leaders with an accounting background, to examine best practices in other districts for making recommendations on how Nyack can maintain high educational standards while reducing overhead costs?

There are a number of ways to provide significant cost savings to districts and district taxpayers. First, the pension costs have risen 210% over the last 5 years. The state legislature must create a new pension tier for all new public employees. This tier would ideally require new employees to pay over the course of their employment rather than for just a small part of it. The savings would be significant.

Health costs went up 51% over the past 5 years. The state can do more and if there was a statewide health insurance cooperative, the savings would be substantial.

We need to continue advocating for repeal of the Wick's Law. Wick's adds 20-30% to the cost of capital construction. Buffalo, NYC and other parts of the state are already exempt. It is time that Nyack's taxpayers get that same break.

We need to garner additional grants as I have done in my tenure. We need to be engaged and involved and advocating on the local, state and federal level for additional aid and for an end to unfunded and under funded mandates.

We need to work for property tax relief by advocating for a fair tax plan that reduces the unfair reliance on the property tax to fund public education.

B. I have already indicated my support for the strategic plan. One of the committees charged in that plan covers the desire to utilize the expertise of our community members. I am a member of the Coalition of Local School Board's Associations and we share insights, best practices and cost savings ideas regularly. I am actually impressed with the fiscal management of the district. Every year that I have been on the board the taxpayers have been given 1.3 million dollars to reduce the tax levy. The 1.3 million dollars comes, in large part, from prudent cost savings that are then given back to the taxpayers. I would welcome the opportunity to go into greater detail regarding the annual 1.3 million dollars in savings. Please call me at 914-714-8577

I will allow this to be my closing statement.

### **Bryan Burrell's platform:**

- Help the district continue to focus on Academic Excellence for all students.
- Work for property tax relief by advocating for a fair tax plan that reduces the unfair reliance on the property tax to fund public education.
- Improve communication with district residents by reaching out to all parts of the community for input, constructive criticism, and to create partnerships.
- Work with the state and federal governments to reduce unproven and underfunded mandates.
- Work to keep the accountability of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) while encouraging all to recognize that there are measures of student performance other than standardized tests. (ie. Our athletic programs and our visual and performing arts programs.)