

2024 School Board Election



Three seats are open on the Vestal Board of Education for three-year terms expiring in June 2027. The following candidates are on the ballot for these seats. **Please note, these candidates are listed in ballot order as determined by random drawing conducted by the District Clerk.**

There are four questions that all School Board candidates answer about issues important to stakeholders in the Vestal Central School District. Please see the insert for each candidate's answers to these questions.



Chadwin Smith

Dr. Chadwin Smith has been a Vestal resident for nine years. He has a B.S. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Fisheries & Wildlife), a Master of Public Affairs from Indiana University (Environmental Policy & Natural Resources Management), and a Ph.D. in Natural Resource Sciences from the University of Nebraska.

President and owner of Headwaters Corporation, a natural resources consulting firm, Dr. Smith also spent 11 years with American Rivers, conducting conservation advocacy and river management. A Vestal parent, he was a member of the African Road PTA for seven years, a member of the VMS PTO for three years, and is currently a member of the VHS PTO. Dr. Smith has coached Odyssey of the Mind, Vestal Grizzlies Girls Basketball, and VYSA Youth Soccer for a number of years. He is an active member of the VHS Girls Lacrosse Booster Club.

In the community, Dr. Smith has enjoyed volunteering at the Central United Methodist Church, helping to prepare and serve Thanksgiving Dinner to the community.

He and his wife, Kelli, have three daughters - Karson, a 2021 Golden Bear alum and rising senior at Dartmouth College; Rowen, a Class of 2024 senior; and Harper, a current ninth-grader at Vestal High School.

Mr. Eric LaClair has been a resident within the Vestal School Central District for 20 years. With a Bachelor's degree in Forest Resource Management and Master's degree from West Virginia University, Mr. LaClair has spent 27 years in the forest products industry. Currently Head Forester at Wagner Lumber, he oversees timber procurement in six states. As his children grew up attending Vestal Schools, Mr. LaClair has been pleased to share his knowledge in the past with Vestal students through classroom presentations he has made at Tioga Hills Elementary and Vestal Middle Schools. In addition, he has added his support at athletic events and school musicals, both for VMS and VHS.



Eric LaClair

His sons are both Golden Bear graduates and his daughter is a current senior at Vestal High School. Mr. LaClair currently sits on the Town of Owego Planning Board and has served as the past president of the Tioga Terrace Civic Association for six years.



Mrs. Amanda Atkinson has resided in the Vestal CSD for 14 years. She earned a B.S. in Secondary Education with a concentration in Social Studies from SUNY New Paltz and completed her Master's in Literacy Education for Grades 5 - 12 at Binghamton University. With 17 years of experience in education, Mrs. Atkinson has worked locally as a middle school Social Studies teacher. Throughout her years in education, she has advised student groups, such as SADD and National Junior Honor Society and led her students in various community and charity events. Mrs. Atkinson also has experience teaching and working at the high school level.

Amanda Atkinson

A member of the Glenwood School Community Association (GSCA) for six years, she has served as the unit's vice president before serving as the GSCA president for the last four years. She has led efforts to raise money for educational programs, to sponsor field trips and community events, and to promote literacy with fundraisers aimed at getting more books into students' hands.

In the community, Mrs. Atkinson and her husband, owners of Vestal Spray Foam, sponsor a Challenger League team. As co-leader of a Vestal Girl Scout troop, she has helped organize charity events in support of veterans (Valentines for Veterans), collected donations and supplies for the Vestal Fire Department, and supported residents at a Vestal nursing home with holiday cards. Mrs. Atkinson also actively works with Binghamton University annually to mentor future teachers.

She and her husband, Jason, have two children currently attending Vestal Schools.

Mrs. Sumeeta Chaudhri has been a Vestal resident for over 17 years. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and English Literature, with a minor in Fine Arts. She has experience as a college admissions officer for Yale School of Management and in accounts payable for Catholic Charities of Albany and Rensselaer Counties. Currently, she supports Four Corners Assessment & Counseling of Vestal as a part-time office manager.



Sumeeta Chaudhri

An ardent coach of Odyssey of the Mind teams since 2017, Mrs. Chaudhri also initiated and chartered the "Taste of ARE," an annual event to showcase the beauty of cultural diversity within the African Road Elementary School community. She has served as African Road PTA's president for two years and volunteered for the Event Planning and Fundraising committees. As a Girl Scout troop leader, Mrs. Chaudhri helped her cadette earning her Silver Award organize "Interfaith Iftar" at Vestal Middle School. Currently, she is serving on the board of Vestal Dollars for Scholars.

For the past 10 years, she has volunteered as a henna artist, organizing and staffing a free henna booth during the Town of Vestal "Summer Celebration" picnic. She regularly volunteers at the Islamic Organization of the Southern Tier as well, by coordinating a fundraising program to support various charities. Finally, she also enjoys volunteering as a community artist for various nonprofits.

A proud Vestal parent, Mrs. Chaudhri's son, Humza, graduated from Vestal in 2021, and her daughter, Abeera, in 2023. Her youngest daughter, Nabeeha, is currently a tenth-grader at Vestal High School.

2024 Board of Education Election Information

Candidates, in the order they will appear on the ballot on May 21, 2024



Chadwin Smith



Eric LaClair



Amanda Atkinson



Sumeeta Chaudhri

Questions for Vestal Board of Education candidates:

1. Do you feel the State and Federal changes in public education will have a positive or negative impact on education? How? Why?
2. What is your vision for education in this community?
3. What is the most important responsibility of a School Board member?
4. What do you see as the major obstacles or challenges facing our school district, and how would you attempt to solve them?

Dr. Chadwin Smith/Candidate Answers:



1. New State and Federal changes related to improving District funding and broadening the available options for curriculum, additional advanced courses, STEM education, and extracurricular activities are positive because that will strengthen the District and the Vestal community over time by attracting families and ensuring Vestal graduates succeed both as engaged citizens and in their careers. New State and Federal changes related to shrinking funding and curriculum options, and that seek to limit student and teacher access to requisite educational materials and opportunities, are negative because that will lessen the ability of Vestal students to succeed post-graduation, lessen the ability of teachers to deliver a quality education and feel supported, and will make Vestal a less desirable community for current and potential future families.

2. A robust, broad, challenging, and modern public school education provided in safe and updated facilities for all children of the Vestal community. Teachers being supported and valued to do the job at which they are experts, and administrators empowered and encouraged to be innovative, adaptive, and collaborative. A curriculum and extracurricular activities that can support all Vestal students succeeding at any college or post-graduation occupation they seek. A leader in public education not just in this region, but also at the State level for all students.

3. Serve as a voice of the community, but do so by taking the time to be educated on the issues so that, as a Board member, I can support informed and data-driven decision-making in the best interest of our diverse student population and so that taxpayer dollars are allocated wisely. This includes review and approval of the annual District budget, District policies, and specific personnel issues. My occupation entails pulling together multiple interested parties with disparate points of view and value systems to develop policy and budgets, and I believe bringing such skills to bear are key to fulfilling my responsibility as a Board member. It is also important to engage in transparent and frequent communication with the Superintendent with an informed point of view.

4. Major challenges include specific public pressure points on individual segments of the District budget as the District builds policy through the annual budget, the rise of misinformation and the use of social media to push personal values and beliefs onto the thought landscape of public education, and creatively engaging parents in exploring their role in ensuring student success. I intend to apply commonly accepted methods of public budgeting and finance to help ensure District goals, objectives, and priorities are matched by the appropriate expenditure of taxpayer dollars and other District funds. I intend to always use supported facts and be transparent with District personnel, fellow Board members, and the community. And, I intend to engage in frequent and open communication with Vestal parents about how best to support Vestal students and teachers and find ways to build on and respond to the economic disparities of our Vestal school families.



Eric LaClair/Candidate Answers:

1. Yes, I believe anytime there is a change in State or Federal changes there will be an impact. From a financial aspect this can have both negative and positive impacts on how the district operates. From a curriculum standpoint, it's good that we all have standards to meet to give our children the best education. Though it could be negative if regulations restrict the district's ability to perform at a higher level.
2. To provide a safe place, physically and emotionally, for every student to learn. To have a strong diversity of programs that enhances all students to excel. To ensure taxpayers their money is being spent to ensure a solid and robust education. Ensure transparency and communication with all.
3. To prepare for every meeting and ask questions to gain a greater understanding of the content. To be able to hear others and actively listen to their concerns and bring to the superintendent. To be able to push back and keep a dialogue between other board members.
4. There seems to be a deficit of staff feeling valued, and heard over the past years. It's important for all staff to feel valued, heard and seen. I believe keeping this in front of the current Superintendent is important and following up on this during the review process.

Amanda Atkinson/Candidate Answers

1. The inclusion of Social Emotional learning across the disciplines is a huge benefit to all students as it is an extremely important part of education and human development. It is through this process that students can learn to develop and apply the knowledge to help them become caring and responsible members of society. Adding this to the curriculum, allows the Vestal School District to live up to our goals of teaching the whole child. This type of education is something our society greatly needs.
2. Vestal has the ability to go above and beyond to educate every student and meet their needs while still keeping standards high. With inclusion, a diverse curriculum and various opportunities for students to be successful, Vestal School District can be the example that schools across the country look to for guidance.
3. One of the most important responsibilities of a Board member is to stay focused on the students, what they need and what is best for them. Board of Education members should always be advocating for all students. Staying focused on the education of all children while also supporting our school staff in the best ways we can is paramount in the success of any School Board.
4. One of my biggest concerns are class sizes, specifically at the primary level from kindergarten up to sixth grade. These are pivotal years for students, and large class sizes hinder the crucial relationships and connections that students need in school. We also need



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Amanda Atkinson/Candidate Answers

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to make sure that we are educating all of our students regardless of background or ability so we can better meet their needs. As a Board Member, I would focus my energy on making sure we address these issues.



Sumeeta Chaudhri/Candidate Answers:

1. Recent changes in federal and New York State public education policies have the potential to have both positive and negative effects, depending on how they are implemented. While these shifts aim to enhance educational experiences and outcomes, they also pose challenges for schools, especially for teachers, in adapting to new regulations and requirements. By adopting a thoughtful and evidence-based approach, providing adequate resources and support to the teachers, school districts must navigate the complexities of new education policies and create a positive and equitable learning environment for all students.

2. My vision for education in this community is to ensure every student has access to high-quality education that meets their individual needs, equipping them with practical skills that are relevant in today's ever-changing world; ensuring to make our special education programs stronger, prioritizing holistic education that nurtures students' social, emotional, and mental well-being alongside academic achievement. I aim to collaborate with teachers, staff, parents, and community members to create a strong partnership that empowers students to reach their full potential and become lifelong learners.

3. The most important responsibility of a Board of Education candidate is listening. By actively listening, a Board member can gain valuable insights, understand different perspectives, and effectively represent the diverse interests of all stakeholders; it allows them to create inclusive policies, promote transparency, and build trust within the community. Prioritizing listening as a key responsibility helps ensure that the educational system meets the needs of all those it serves.

4. As a candidate for the Board of Education, I am fully aware that one of the significant challenges faced by our school district is the severe budget cuts and staff reductions stemming from reduced state funding. I firmly believe that effective solutions can only be achieved through the collective efforts and collaboration of the entire Board. It is through unified decision-making, effective problem-solving, and supporting superintendent's recommendations to prioritize budget allocations that protect essential programs and student services that we can overcome these obstacles and ensure the success of our schools.