

# 2021 School Board Election



*There are three seats open on the Vestal Board of Education for three-year terms expiring in June 2024, and there are five eligible candidates on the ballot for these seats.*

*Please note that the candidates are listed in ballot order determined by random drawing conducted by the Vestal District Clerk.*

*The attached insert includes the Candidates' answers to this year's questions about issues important to stakeholders in the Vestal Central School District.*



***Eric LaClair***

Mr. Eric LaClair has been a resident within the Vestal Central School District for 17 years. With a Bachelor's degree in Forest Resource Management and Master's degree from West Virginia University, Mr. LaClair has spent 24 years in the forest products industry. Currently the Head Forester at Wagner Lumber, he oversees timber procurement in six states. Mr. LaClair has been pleased to share his knowledge with Vestal students through classroom presentations he has made at Tioga Hills Elementary and Vestal Middle Schools. In addition, he is pleased to add his support at athletic events and school musicals.

He is also a Vestal parent with a son and a daughter both attending Vestal High School, as well as a son who has graduated. Mr. LaClair has been active in coaching baseball, T-ball through Teener leagues, in the community. He served as the past president of the Tioga Terrace Civic Association for six years and is involved in the men's ministry at his church.

Mr. J. Dinno Nistico has been a Vestal resident for seven years, and he has served on the Vestal Board of Education for three years. He has been the School Board liaison to Clayton Avenue Elementary School. He also serves on the Policy and Safety committees. With degrees in Pre-Med/Environmental Studies (B.A. SUNY Oneonta) and Education (M.A. Dowling College), Mr. Nistico taught as a Science teacher in Bay Shore, Sayville, and Sewanhaka schools for 30-plus years. Most recently, he has been a Substitute Teacher in local school districts, including Chenango Valley, Maine-Endwell and Union-Endicott.

An active member of Retirement Council 11, Mr. Nistico also supports community organizations such as Goodwill and Southern Tier Food Bank, as well as local church food banks.



***Dinno Nistico***



**Kathryn Egan**

A physical therapist at UHS who has served the community for over 27 years, Kathryn Egan received her BS in Physical Therapy from Daemen College and is also a certified as a health/fitness instructor through American College of Sports Medicine.

She has supported children in Vestal Schools as a PTO member, past president of the Tioga Hills PTA, and as a Field Hockey booster club member. In the community, she coached Vestal Youth Soccer for four years and T-ball for three years. Kathryn also spent six years as a volunteer Show Coordinator for Johnston School of Irish Dance and Clann Na Cara Irish Dance. A member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the American Carpatho Russian Club, she enjoys playing in an adult coed recreational soccer league and serving her church, Our Lady of Sorrows, as a lector for over 30 years.

Kathryn's son was a member of the Vestal High School Class of 2020, and her daughter is currently a sophomore. Kathryn has lived in the Vestal School District for over 40 years.

A Class of 1979 Vestal HS alumnus, Dr. Dhruv Agneshwar returned to his community after receiving a BS at the University of Rochester and his M.D. from the University of Guadalajara. He completed an internship and his OB-GYN residency at SUNY Downstate. Dr. Agneshwar has been practicing Obstetrics and Gynecology in the Southern Tier since 1993 and is the owner of Santé, Comprehensive Women's Healthcare. A past member of the UHS Foundation Board, he has also served as the chair of the OB-GYN Department at UHS for 8 years and teaches medical students as a clinical assistant professor at Upstate Medical University.

In the community, he was a past president of the Binghamton Country Club and is also a member of the Sons of Italy. Both of his daughters attended and graduated from Vestal Schools, and he was a proud supporter of their athletic and extracurricular activities.



**Dhruv Agneshwar, MD**



**Jeffrey Wahl**

Mr. Jeffrey Wahl is a Vestal HS alumnus (Class of 2001). His career and educational background includes the Defense Language Institute, Northern-European University, National Cryptologic School, Language Training Center Europe and the U.S. Naval War College. Retired as a Chief Petty Officer (E-7) from the U.S. Navy, Mr. Wahl served 11 years as a Cryptologic Linguist. During his service, he was awarded many medals and honors including the Joint Service Commendation Medal, Navy Commendation Medal, Navy Achievement Medal, Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal, and Enlisted Information Warfare Specialist & Submarine Warfare Pins. Mr. Wahl currently is a highly sought out performer, lecturer, vocalist, music director, composer and conductor. He has performed extensively throughout the U.S, Canada, Germany and Russia. For the past two years, Mr. Wahl has been the Director of the musical at Windsor HS. He is also the founder and current Musical Director of the Binghamton Baroque Orchestra.

Mr. Wahl is the father of three children enrolled in Vestal Schools, who are currently being homeschooled due to the pandemic. One would attend Vestal HS, one would be in middle school, and the youngest is elementary-aged. He has attended School Board and PTA meetings, attended his children's athletic events and assisted with the Vestal Music Department. In the community, Mr. Wahl has served as the Southern Tier Teachers Association competition chairman for the past five years and was an assistant coach for Vestal Little League during the 2020 season.

*Answers on Insert*

# 2021 School Board Election

**Information on the six School Board candidates (listed in ballot order) continues from pages 10 & 11.**

For comparison purposes, each candidate for the Vestal Board of Education has answered the following questions... *Please see their answers on the inside and back of this insert.*

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

## **Eric LaClair**

1. State changes during COVID have made it very difficult for teachers, children, parents and the school district. Compared to previous years, many more students are not performing well, while their families are struggling to help their children, as they also try to work and provide an income. Safety is very important so our teachers know firsthand what works best for their students and having a high level of engagement from the teachers is crucial. I see this as one of the most important engagements to provide the most success to get our children back to the classroom.

2. My vision is for Vestal to be rated at the top in education in New York State and is able to serve and educate all kids. A school that provides a diverse education, clubs and activities for every student who wishes to participate. A safe place for students to learn and feel valued.

3. To be able to listen, hear and communicate with all stakeholders. Seek to understand every aspect and to help find the best solution. To be able to challenge other board members and the majority when needed. To ensure the children are getting the best education for the money that is spent and allocated to programs, and that our teachers are taken care of.

4. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the “No Child Left Behind” Act. Throughout this

## **Dinno Nistico**

1. Regarding funding, State and Federal changes put a greater strain on an already strained education system. On the Federal level, there was a recent push to divert funds intended for public education to Charter Schools. This directly has a negative effect on local public education. This mindset of “starving public education” is counter-productive across the education landscape, but is especially dangerous for smaller districts and programs, especially in the area of special education; at the state level, Albany needs to make allowances for the recent loss of revenues in localities like ours.

2. My vision is to strengthen the relationships that keep the district academically strong. I would like to work with my fellow Board members to make sure that encouraging and cultivating the home-school connection is an important aspect of what we do. We are a caring, involved community, and that has made us a stand-out district in New York State. Our Parent-Teacher Organizations help to provide that important connection between the home and the school.

3. The most important responsibility of a Board member is to serve the best educational interests of students and families in our district. Vestal has consistently proven itself on a local, State and even National level to be one of the best school districts. It is

## **Kathryn Egan**

1. Stimulus money recently earmarked for education as well as the reinstatement of foundation aid are promising sources of financial income to ensure that Vestal CSD continues to be a high-performing school district. These funds will help finance student programs, enrichment opportunities and professional development. There is an opportunity to outline and implement a strategic plan for use of this vital funding.

2. The Vestal CSD ranks “above average” to “far above average” compared to other schools in NYS. Unfortunately, over the past 30 years of living in the Southern Tier area, primarily living in the Vestal school district, I have witnessed the decreasing graduating class sizes and aging population in all of the districts. By maximizing our resources and prudent planning for future student generations, we will maintain our status as an excellent school district in which to live and learn for all in the Vestal Central School District.

3. Board membership is an active role within the community and part of a working team. Board members should advocate for students’ best education and learning environment. Board members should innovatively plan to meet the needs of students, parents, faculty, staff and administration working within the allotted budget. Board members should assist to implement plans and support the

## **Dhruv Agneshwar**

1. The global pandemic this past year has certainly had a negative impact on public education as we know it. New York State guidelines have left all decisions to the local districts and so we have a mixed-bag of results with districts making up their own rules, regulations and guidelines. Vestal has chosen to take a “conservative” approach which has unfortunately resulted in keeping our children out of our schools. Vestal has been reacting to the new normal instead of being a leader and defining what our new normal should be; we need a “reopening plan” that gets our students back to full time in-person learning.

2. I am a strong supporter of public education and want to make sure that the K-12 education in Vestal remains academically strong. We need to make sure that we continue to support education and all the extra-curricular activities from arts to sports and everything in between. We need a school board that will challenge students, support teachers and all staff, foster better communication with parents, and invest in keeping our buildings and facilities safe.

3. The most important responsibility of a School Board member is to be an advocate for ALL children. All the great teachers that I had during my years at Vestal have played a huge part in my success in college, medical school and now as a practi-

## **Jeffrey Wahl**

1. State and Federal laws are ever changing. It is our job to change with them and prepare our children for life. Life will always throw different challenges at you, and the constant changes in education will help prepare children for life. It is OUR job to make sure the children are prepared to meet those challenges head on, by educating them and giving them the tools they require to meet whatever challenges come their way.

2. To guide the youth of today into the future of tomorrow. The way to achieve this is with a solid foundation to classroom educational instruction five days a week. We must give every child in this district the tools they need to become inquisitive lifelong learners. This all starts from the first day they enter the classroom, to the day they receive their diploma.

3. Accountability. Holding those on the Board accountable for their decisions, and being willing and able to stand behind all decisions that a given Board member is willing to make.

4. Currently, we face a lack of leadership and transparency from the District as a whole. This includes the Superintendent and the current Board of Education. Throughout this past year, decisions have been made and followed through in less than a transparent way, leaving

**Eric LaClair Answers** *continued*

pandemic, children/students were left behind in a different way. To resolve this from happening in the future, we need to collaborate beyond our “own walls” to ensure that every child’s needs are met. This starts by listening and engaging parents and teachers, as well as communicating and working with the greatest intentions in mind.

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**Dinno Nistico Answers** *continued*

our responsibility as a Board to work together with all the stakeholders – students, families, community members, teachers, administrators and business – to make sure that we continue to hold those high standards of education and to help our children succeed on their paths through our local school system and beyond.

4. The world is ever-changing and evolving – economically, politically and scientifically. It is our challenge to provide our students with the skills and strategies to compete and succeed in a global environment. As such, we need to make sure that our focus and mission is on-point and current, especially in the area of STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Professional development for our teachers that is meaningful and practical in this regard will be key.

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**Kathryn Egan Answers** *continued*

education team, listening openly and willingly to explore and attempt new ideas.

4. Immediate challenges include returning students to school the maximum amount possible while providing a safe environment for bus drivers, staff, teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators to work and students to learn. Long-term challenges will be to address the permanent changes we’re all likely to face. Clearly identifying mutual goals and addressing each of the barriers to achieving these goals with respect for one another and with a problem-solving focus is a recipe for success in our district.

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**Dhruv Agneshwar Answers** *continued*

cing physician. Vestal’s reputation for excellence is the reason I moved back here to raise my family. As a school board member, I will use my voice to represent parents, teachers and staff and most importantly, our children.

4. School as we know it came to an abrupt halt in March 2020 with students and teachers and parents facing something that we’ve never faced before: no school. In the initial months, coming up with a solution of how to educate students remotely and how to effectively implement a hybrid education took priority. But a year later, our students still are not completely back to in-person education. As a physician with years of experience, I feel I can add some expertise in guiding our students back to full time in-person learning in a safe and effective manner.

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**Jeffrey Wahl Answers** *continued*

many in the community to wonder how decisions are made. If elected, I would demand transparency and accountability across the board from day one of my term.