



2023 Westwood Town Election: Candidate responses to Inclusive Westwood questions

*****Please remember to vote on April 25th!*****

Context

While Inclusive Westwood does not endorse specific candidates in our town elections, we do seek to provide our 1000+ members with information relevant to our mission to inform their voting choices. For the April 2023 election, we therefore invited all candidates running for contested elected office to answer two questions, and said that we would share all answers received by April 15 back with our listserv, via our Facebook page, and with local news outlets. All responses received are shared below.

Questions

Please limit the response to each question to 300 words or less.

1. If you are elected, how will principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) be relevant to the work you will be doing? Please include specific DEI initiatives/efforts that you would or would not support in your answer. (For School Committee candidates, please include your point of view on the recent WPS equity audit findings and recommendations in your comments. For Library Trustee candidates, please include your point of view on censorship.)
2. From your perspective, in what ways is Westwood succeeding in being an equitable and inclusive town for all, and where is improvement needed? Please share thoughts on both parts of this question.

Town resources

[Westwood Select Board Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#)

[Westwood Public Schools Office of Equity, Integration, and Community Partnerships](#)

Candidate responses

Candidate	Question 1	Question 2
School Committee - 2 seats open		
<p>JoAnna French</p>	<p>Thank you, Inclusive Westwood, for the opportunity to answer these important questions.</p> <p>Last year, we used grant money to fund the WPS Equity Audit. Its purpose was to identify our strengths and weaknesses, and clarify what action we must take so we can meet the needs of more families in our community. From that important work, came 5 clear and immediate recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create an Equity Communication Plan so we're all on the same page and using the same language. ● Ensure we're all working from the same framework for all decisions. ● Create a plan to measure our progress and track our data. ● Hire a Director of Human Resources, with a focus on hiring and retaining top talent and diversifying our faculty and administration. ● Ensure equity and culturally-responsive practices are a part of professional development opportunities in the district. <p>If elected, I will prioritize and approve the budget to hire a director of human resources to serve as a key part of the district leadership team. Our Westwood community has grown more diverse in the last 20 years and students of color now make up nearly 25% of our</p>	<p>I was pleased that the district co-signed the Select Board's Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in 2022. Its commitment to realizing this mission is evident in the creation of the WPS Department of Equity, Integration, and Community Partnerships and the hiring of Lateefah Franck to lead this team. In conversations with district leadership about these issues, including Emily Parks (Superintendent), Ms. Franck, Mike Redmon (Principal, Thurston), Edward Walker (Dean of Students, Thurston), Deb Gallagher (Principal, Downey), and some of the current School Committee members, I sense a genuine recognition of the importance of and the desire to carry out this mission. That the district did an equity audit sends a clear message that it seeks better address the needs of all members of our community.</p> <p>I applaud these efforts, but we cannot rest on our laurels. Realizing education equity should not be relegated to check-the-box platitudes, nor should the work fall on the shoulders of just a few administrative leaders. The recommendations of the Equity Audit must become everyone's work.</p> <p>The Equity Audit revealed that our students experience racism, bigotry, and homophobia in school. We also learned that there's a perceived lack of support from district leadership regarding DEI policies and practices. I believe there's a relationship here between student</p>

	<p>population. However, the diversity among our faculty has stayed roughly the same at 95% white.</p> <p>Research shows that <i>all</i> students benefit from the opportunity to learn from a more diverse faculty. Let's create a plan to diversify our educators, and ensure they are prepared to deliver a challenging, culturally relevant curriculum.</p> <p>I'm personally excited to support the first recommendation: to create a communications plan. This is really where we'll see success: using the same language and definitions for this work and keeping our community informed of our goals and progress. With 20+ years of communications expertise in higher education, it's one of the key contributions that I would bring to the committee.</p>	<p>behavior, inadequate response, and a feeling that educators lack district support to respond to these actions.</p> <p>Policies and practices in response to racism, bigotry and homophobia must be clear, consistent, and unequivocal. There are other areas for improvement, including addressing bias in discipline, consistent approaches to bullying prevention and response, and disparities in academic outcomes across marginalized communities. However, I believe that our most pressing challenge is addressing the inconsistent response to bigotry and racism and ensuring our teachers and school leadership are trained and prepared to address these issues.</p>
Amanda Phillips	<p>One reason I'm running for re-election is to have the opportunity to keep the momentum going regarding DEI initiatives. If I retain my seat I intend to continue to approach all decisions through an equity lens; specifically, who will be harmed vs who will benefit from each choice. The recent WPS equity audit findings were eye-opening and I would support all recommendations from the audit, including the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collecting, tracking and reporting equity data ● Developing a communication plan to keep community informed around equity work ● Expanding professional development opportunities related to DEI and making them required as opposed to opt-in, and ensuring that culturally responsive practices are embedded in all professional learning opportunities ● Hiring an HR Director with an explicit focus on equity and workforce diversity 	<p>While it's fantastic that the Select Board and the Human Rights Task Force released a statement affirming their commitment to making the town more equitable and inclusive, I think we still have an enormous amount of work to do. With the exception of the schools, I'm not aware of significant forward progress related to DEI work, despite the efforts of groups like Inclusive Westwood. In order for WPS to be successful in becoming a more inclusive and equitable district, we need the support of the community.</p> <p>I think that the community needs to come together to find ways to denounce hate and find ways to ensure our town provides a welcoming environment where marginalized groups feel included and experience a sense of safety and belonging. This work could be begun through a series of forums facilitated by experts and ideally the creation of a working group of community</p>

	<p>In addition, in my role as the chairperson of the School Committee's policy review subcommittee, I intend to ensure that each and every District policy is thoroughly reviewed with a specific focus on equity.</p> <p>Another idea I'd like to explore is the potential for instituting School Committee office hours for WHS students. I think this could help to amplify the voices of marginalized students and provide a method to elevate concerns and identify trends. The equity audit finding that some students are experiencing hate and discrimination is extremely distressing, although not surprising, I'd like to work with District leadership to respond to these issues, with a focus on finding the right intervention and education for students who are the cause of these experiences so that we can prevent them from causing more harm.</p> <p>This work is long overdue and we've made some real progress over the last couple of years. It's critical that we have the right leadership team in place to keep the District moving forward.</p>	<p>members who identify changes that need to be made to achieve this goal. I would also like to see the community pull in the necessary stakeholders (real estate agents, town leadership, local clergy, cultural affinity groups, athletic organizations, local business owners etc.) to be a part of this work.</p> <p>It seems like there are thousands of people in the community who value equity and inclusivity but there isn't a formal framework to move the work forward. For that reason I think that the town needs to consider pursuing an equity audit that could provide an action plan that prioritizes inclusion and belonging. Perhaps if we amplified the voices of those that are marginalized, more people would see the need to demand action.</p>
<p>Tom Themistocles</p>	<p>I believe that Westwood students gain socially and emotionally from the district's emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion. I believe Westwood students, teachers, and administrators to be kind, respectful and tolerant as a group. I appreciate all of their efforts to listen, to learn and to improve in the area of DEI. If elected, the social and emotional well-being of all of our students would be a top priority for me. As the Westwood Public School website says "We believe that every student who attends school in Westwood deserves to reach their full potential..." I could not agree with that more, I want ALL students to be given the tools to succeed in life. The district recently conducted an equity audit, some of the</p>	<p>Tara and I moved to Westwood because of the people and the schools. We feel Westwood is a very welcoming community. People are living here for a reason. As a town, there is always work we can do to be more equitable and inclusive. It must start at home. We must be kind to all of our neighbors, and respect everyone, even if we have a difference of opinion. In regards to Westwood Schools I do believe our educators have created an environment where students feel safe and accepted. For the most part, the recent Equity Audit found that to be the case. The work to be done in this area is never complete and there is always room for improvement. The fact that Westwood Public</p>

	<p>priority recommendations that came out of that audit were creating an Equity Communication Plan, hiring a director of Human Resources and coming up with a Equity Data Collection, Tracking, and Reporting Plan. I support all of these action items. One of my main priorities, if elected to the School Committee, would be to figure out how we can diversify our teaching staff. We need our teachers to reflect our students. Finally, as Inclusive Westwood says in its statement, every child who attends school in Westwood should feel seen and valued in their unique identity, and their families should have safe and supported experiences as well. We need to be tolerant of ALL people in town. We all must be honest with ourselves, and our true intentions.</p>	<p>Schools recognizes that this an ongoing process further shows their commitment to equity and inclusion. An area for improvement would be to ensure that ALL students and families feel their needs are equally prioritized and addressed. I applaud the town of Westwood for expanding its METCO program to begin in kindergarten. This is a tremendous step in providing opportunities for all. I think we can do better as a school district to make sure there is a place where all students feel supported academically and socially. Students need to have a go-to staff as discussed in the Equity Audit. I am confident that Westwood will continue to put in the hard work so that all students can feel accepted for who they are and thrive.</p>
Library Trustee - 2 seats open		
<p>Wendy Hickey</p>	<p>The most fundamental principles this country was founded on are the freedoms of speech and expression. This is something I feel strongly about protecting. As a lawyer, I spend my days advocating for others. We all learn and grow from engaging with diverse members of our community. Encouraging our community to interact with each other in various library programs will give people an opportunity to learn about each other and gain an appreciation and respect for differences – something which can only make us a stronger community. The Library Trustees created a robust long range plan which includes ways to include those who are unable to get into the library, programs to attract more visitors to the library and programs to help our community members engage with each other. If elected I will continue what those before me started with the long-range plans expected to carry us forward for the next several years.</p> <p>If elected I will be a strong advocate for the principle that</p>	<p>The schools and the libraries have done a very good job of helping children learn about different cultures and heritages. Children are encouraged to share traditions with their classmates and learn about other cultures. This type of learning in the schools teaches the children to respect each other and appreciate their differences. Over the years when it has become clear that a program is insensitive to the feelings of certain children, changes have been made. For example, the Sheehan school used to have Donuts with Dad and Muffins with Mom. When thought was given to the fact that not all children have a mom or a dad, for a wide variety of reasons, the program was changed to Sweets with Someone Special so as not to leave anyone out. While it may seem like a silly example, I believe it is a perfect example of Westwood recognizing something that was not inclusive and fixing it.</p> <p>I do not have a specific example of anything that needs</p>

	<p>ensorship has no place in our library. There is a place for all books and it is up to us as parents to help our children understand what they are reading.</p>	<p>improvement. I am proud to live in a community that recognizes when change is necessary and is open to doing the work to ensure Westwood remains a great place to raise a family.</p>
<p>Melissa Morabito</p>	<p>If elected to Library Trustee, I will continue my efforts to advocate for the principles of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in everything that I do. I am against all censorship as a community member, educator, and parent. Censorship is undemocratic and bad for our community. As libraries across the nation are grappling with book banning, I feel grateful to live in a community that universally supports access to all reading materials. We as a community should be actively pursuing opportunities to have the difficult conversations particularly about diversity. As the center of our community, the library has the opportunity to hold space for this conversation. It is even in the strategic plan! The strategic plan calls for “inclusivity and creating safe, inviting spaces”. This is in line with my core values and if elected to library trustee, I will be an advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion on the board. Libraries are for everyone and to do that we must embrace these principles.</p> <p>I share the commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion that is an underlying value in the Westwood community. To that end, I proudly signed the IW statement on diversity, equity and inclusion and have been an active member of the organization. I have incorporated the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion into my own professional and personal life. 38% of the student population at UMASS Lowell identify as non-white and it is my job to provide the teaching and mentorship that they both need and deserve. Of course, I will bring these same values to my role as library trustee. This is why, I ask for</p>	<p>I believe that our community has put an emphasis on the value of equity which means making sure that every resident has what is necessary to be successful. The Westwood Public Library is an excellent example of this. The library has so much great programming largely funded by Friends of the Westwood Public Library, that is easily accessible to much of the community. We should be proud of the efforts already underway. Yet, as indicated by the recent Diversity, Equity and Inclusion audit in Westwood Public Schools and the library survey, it is clear that we still have more work to do as a community.</p> <p>One of the biggest challenges is that the library must adapt as the community changes. This is a difficult task for any community organization, yet is essential for diversity, equity and inclusion. For example, the library strategic plan identified that Chinese residents are interested in having a Mandarin section of the library—even offering their own books to get it started. The library should be there to meet this demand. As our community continues to grow and demographics shift, it is the responsibility of town services to match those changing needs. We have a strong community that supports our schools and library—as evidenced by the fantastic staff and facilities. I commit to working with the board to make sure that the library adapts to our changing demographics in Westwood to insure that the library remains accessible and inclusive.</p> <p>I would invite you to check out the library strategic plan</p>

	<p>one of your two votes for library trustee when you vote on April 25th at Westwood High School or early at Westwood Police Department on April 14th or 15th.</p>	<p>where 9% of community members participated to get a sense of the library priorities.</p>
<p>Maureen Murphy Von Euw</p>	<p>As a current Trustee, I am proud to say that the Westwood Public Library endorses the Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read Statement, two documents issued by the American Library Association. The selection of materials in Westwood’s library system is predicated on the library user’s right to access materials and the library user’s freedom from censorship by others. And I believe that the freedom to read is essential to our democracy. In response to the increased banning of books in libraries and school districts across the country, the Library Board of Trustees with the Library Director recently reviewed and revised the WPL Collection Development Policy, which is available on the library’s website (updated March of 2022). Further, I believe in the Library Bill of Right’s stance, particularly that "books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves", that “materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation”, that “materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval”, and that “libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment”.</p>	<p>In 2022 the library embarked on the development of a new 3-year strategic plan as required by the Massachusetts Library Commission, and I served on the Strategy Steering Committee. After research into data and analytics, trends, community input (both a community-wide survey and focus groups), the Westwood Library Team developed a new Mission and Vision and 6 Initiatives to focus on in the next 3 years. Our Mission Statement: <i>Westwood Public Library provides easy-to-access resources, services, and experiences that invite people of all ages, cultures and interests to connect, explore, relax, problem-solve and thrive.</i> The initiatives focus on drawing more people in, connecting people and easing divides by being deliberate about inclusivity and creating safe, inviting spaces. The initiatives also focus on continuing efforts to uplift our community and increase quality of life by offering inspiring and interesting collections, programs, and experiences for all patrons. If elected to continue my work as a library trustee, I would continue to support the work of increasing diversity of resources and programs; ensuring equitable access to resources, materials, and programs for all patrons; and intentionally building inclusive spaces that promote and enhance engagement from all of our community members. Essentially, ensuring that people of all backgrounds, cultures, and identities (race, ethnicity, age, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, religion, language, etc) can bring their whole selves, and find a place to explore, learn, and thrive at Westwood Public Library. The work of increasing diversity of patrons and materials, expanding equitable access, and creating a culture of</p>

		inclusion is never finished. There is always more we can do to advance these values in our community.
Select Board - 1 seat open		
<p>Joe Previterra</p>	<p>I've hired many members of marginalized communities over the years. I know first-hand as a Director of a Department with over 60 employees how important diversity, inclusiveness, and equity are to building strong teams. BIDMC promotes a very progressive and inclusive environment. You cannot walk around either campus and not see how important DEI is to us as a COMMUNITY. We take pride in making BIDMC an inclusive and diverse workplace!</p> <p>In my early years as a supervisor, I made it clear that I would not tolerate ANY discriminatory or inappropriate behavior. I have always felt strongly in leading by example and I would conduct myself the same way if elected to the Select Board. That goes for hiring, promotions, and any other opportunities in our community. As a Select Board member, I would conduct myself in the same fashion that I did as a Director at BIDMC.</p> <p>I plan to work to improve the diversity represented in our town staff and on appointed boards that fall under the purview of the Select Board. I've also read the DEI statement the Select Board released last year. I think it's an excellent set of goals and a great start, but we need to do more than just put out a statement - we need to walk the walk. As far as specific initiatives, I'd fully support continuing and expanding the work the Human Rights Task Force has begun. All of our residents need to feel safe and welcome, especially our most vulnerable residents. I'd also explore unconscious bias training, first for our leaders and then for the employees. I'd support the</p>	<p>I'm not sure that Westwood is succeeding at being equitable and inclusive for all. It's an area rich with opportunity. As a Select Board member I'd consider the following initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meet with the Director of Human Resources and discuss what steps have been taken to address these issues. I want to get insight into what policies we have in place, and make sure we are taking this seriously. I'm also ready to expand those policies and really be an advocate for change and growth in this area. ● Depending upon what has and hasn't been done, I'd strongly recommend a "Needs Assessment" survey of the Town's employees and possibly the School District as well. ● I see this as an educational opportunity both for our leadership and the employees as well. I'd explore the possibility of work sessions or training to help promote DEI awareness in the workplace. I know many private companies do this, and Westwood may have something in place, but I want to examine what programs would truly have an impact and get more buy-in from the stakeholders. If our leadership doesn't prioritize these initiatives, they won't get much traction. This training should be leadership-driven with the goal of better serving the public and our community, especially our most marginalized/vulnerable residents. ● I feel it's important for people in town leadership

	<p>DEI efforts and initiatives in our schools as well, while that's not specifically the purview of the Select Board, I think it's crucial that our curriculum be inclusive, honest, and authentic.</p>	<p>to speak up when they see hate and intolerance in the community. I'm not afraid to do that. I have loved ones who are members of the LGBTQ+ community, so the issue of LGBTQ+ rights is personal to me and not just something conceptual. I care deeply about people, and I really try to use my position to help as much as I can. I've always done so and would approach serving in town government the same way.</p> <p>Lastly, I'd love to continue this conversation so please feel free to email me at votejoe4sb@gmail.com.</p>
<p>Mike Walsh</p>	<p>In the nine years I have served as a Select Board member (three as Chair,) we have hired one of the only minority Town Administrators, Chris Coleman. We formed a Human Rights Task Force to make strides to ensure we, as a community, allow all of our residents to live in a community where they are welcomed and supported. We have issued statements about what we feel Westwood should be. We have instilled in both our police and fire chiefs the need to have a more diverse workforce, and they are continuing to hire new recruits. We as a community continue to listen to our residents, students and church leaders about what other steps we can take to continue making Westwood a community for everyone.</p>	<p>In my opinion, we are making strides, but the work is just beginning. As a more affluent town, we in Westwood need to create more affordable housing so that younger couples can educate their children, and we need to continue to allow our seniors to continue to live in Westwood. We need to continue to support the mental health of our students who are still struggling with the after-effects of the pandemic, and we as a town must continue to create resources for them to strive in life</p>

About Inclusive Westwood

We are a group of community members who are committed to making Westwood a supportive, safe, equitable and inclusive town for all. In collaboration with other community stakeholders and town entities, we seek to embrace and celebrate our differences as one community, and to build our collective awareness and knowledge of how to be positively engaged citizens in an increasingly diverse and dynamic world.

<https://www.facebook.com/InclusiveWestwood>