



Lex-Wiki.Org is a local Wikipedia for Lexington, MA. Lex-wiki.Org covers Arts and Entertainment, Local Flora and Fauna, Local History, City Life as well as Town Government and other issues of public interest in Lexington.

Name: Neerja Juneja Bajaj

Web Site Addresses: www.lexvoteforneerja.com and <http://fb.me/NeerjaBajajforSchoolCommittee>.

Phone: 781-608-5029

Email: njbajaj@yahoo.com

Submission Date: 2/19/2017

Biographical Question

1. *What can you tell us about yourself? Please include a brief outline of your relevant experience, including public offices held, and volunteer work.*

My husband and I moved to Lexington 14 years ago with our two children, now aged 20 (at Brown) and 14 (8th grader at Clarke). We chose Lexington because of its ability to embrace diversity – of culture, ethnicity, religion and thought. My kids have benefited from the excellent academics and the rich music program at Lexington’s public schools. I have a great love and respect for our educational institution and its core principle – “to instill a love for learning”.

I have a Master’s In Computer Science from the University of Maryland. I taught Math and Computer Science before moving over to corporate America. At present, I am working as a product manager at Verizon.

I enjoy participating in multiple aspects of our community. I am the co-president of Indian Americans of Lexington (IAL), a civic organization focused on community building and service. I have participated actively in the PTA at the elementary, middle and high school for the past 8 years. In addition, I am an active volunteer with Parent’s association of Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra (BYSO).

Candidate Platform

2. *Why are you running for the School Committee?*

I am committed and vested in our schools. I have always been engaged with schools as a volunteer and have been meaning to deepen my engagement. This opportunity came at the time in our nation when many things at national level have inspired us to get engaged at grassroots level. I also believe that a diverse committee is critical to making/presenting policies that matter to school going population and changing demographics in Lexington.

3. *What are your short-term and long-term priorities for the Lexington school system?*

In short term I would like to bring to focus:

- **Lower student-teacher ratio:** A higher student-teacher ratio in classroom means our school staff has less time and space per student. Kids depend increasingly on themselves and their peers, which works well for some kids, but for many others is stressful and lonely. A lower student-teacher ratio would provide more opportunities for students to connect with relevant adults in their lives.
- **Project-based learning:** By bringing project based learning to the classroom, students are given additional opportunities to learn and reflect on the content through exploration. This will help our kids participate, collaborate, listen, reflect, innovate and take risks - all qualities that we want to instill in them as tomorrow’s leaders and lifelong learners.
- **Curriculum enrichment:** By adding more levels to the curriculum, we provide more opportunity for students. We need to redefine the Advance Placement (AP) path and require kids to take a level course before they take an AP class. This will allow students to explore all subjects and AP will become an opportunity to immerse in what they like and not the only option.
- **Counselor engagement and parent involvement:** We want to encourage independence and self-advocacy in kids, but we need to remember that we have a diverse student population, that many times does not know when to seek help. Let’s build a village to support all of them by enabling earlier counselor engagement and more parent involvement

In long term we need to ensure that we start to plan for our next generation High School. Also, I would like to propose collaboration with vocational schools to allow for wider and non-academic elective choices for our kids.

Policy Questions

4. *How do you view the relationship between school spending, the quality of our schools in terms of teaching, programs and facilities, and the desirability of our community as a whole?*

There are always three core dimensions to every project – money, time and quality. Schools are no exception. We cannot provide good public education with limited funding. We are very fortunate that we live in a town where core population is committed to quality of schools and also recognizes the fact that it takes money to provide that quality. Quality of Schools, proximity to city, our rich history, our commitment to conservation, our diversity are just some of the key factors that play into the overall desirability of the community as a whole.

5. *What is your view of the Lexington METCO program?*

I support METCO program. While we can and should continue to discuss how the program is being run and what changes if any that can be made, but we should not forget the heart of the program. There are about 250 kids in METCO program and most of them are in elementary schools. Imagine theses 6-10 year olds sitting in bus for one hour. Imagine them leaving their community because their parents want the kids to benefit from the school like ours. We should not take this opportunity away from them.

6. *What should Lexington do to improve existing programs or to bring new programs to our public schools? How would you fund these changes?*

What distinguishes Lexington schools from others is their rich offering of programs like - foreign language, ESL, sports, arts, drama, chorus, orchestra etc. I would look to see if there is an opportunity to collaborate with Minuteman high school, to allow Lexington kids to take electives there. I would also like to see high school kids have emersion and community service program outside of school. Just like middle school most of those programs can be self-funded or supported by private grants.

7. *What are your thoughts on the current efforts to increase the resilience, health and well-being of our students and to decrease their academic and social stress?*

It takes a village to raise a child. Parents, teachers and guidance counselors are all the members of the village. We need to ensure that all of them are connected. We must address the student-teacher ratio, early engagement of counselors and encourage parent’s engagement in school. With guidance and nurture, kids are more eager to try new things, they are more resilient and feel less stressed.

8. *Is the School Committee on the right track regarding school construction plans to address overcrowding? What changes, if any, would you like to see in regards to the school construction plans?*

Plans to extend Clarke and Diamond were now a necessity more than a choice. The plan for a separate pre-k will allow for more space in elementary school and will help build our young community. The part where I would like to see more focus on is our High School. We must start discussions around High School project. Our High School is beyond it life span and is over capacity. 10 prefab modulars have allowed us to offer short term relief, but we need to create a space for educators and kids of next generation. We need to plan better and execute on the plan in a timely manner.

9. *Is the School Committee on the right track in regard to redistricting as a mechanism for optimizing use of elementary and middle school facilities?*

Redistricting may be a tool available to align capacity with the available resources, but it creates a disruption for families, neighborhood and impacts cost elements like transportation costs. We must look at the long term projection, and capacity plans and partner with town’s civic leaders to ensure that we manage the

factors that skew our projections. This will help us serve our community better and deter us from using redistricting as a “fix” for capacity issues.

All candidates are asked to limit the response to each question to at most two or three paragraphs, and to provide the questionnaire responses by end of day Sunday, Feb 19th, 2017. Responses will not be edited, and will run as submitted. They will be posted on lex-wiki.org in PDF format and announced through other town media. Questionnaire coordinator Andrei Radulescu-Banu (bitdribble@gmail.com, 617-216-8509).
