

# April elections: Meet the four candidates for Neenah school board

Samantha West, Appleton Post-Crescent March 20, 2020

NEENAH - Four candidates are facing off in April for three seats on the Neenah Joint School District Board of Education.

The candidates are incumbent Deborah Watry and newcomers Marcelo Garcia, Tom Hanby and Amy Morrissey. Incumbents Scott Thompson and Michelle Swardenski didn't seek re-election.

The three candidates who receive the most votes in the April 7 general election will win three-year terms on the board.

As part of The Post-Crescent's coverage of school board races, we asked the candidates to complete a questionnaire. We asked them why they're running, what makes them the best candidate and how they would address the most important issues facing the school district.

For more information about registering to vote and polling locations, visit the MyVote Wisconsin website at [myvote.wi.gov/en-us/](https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/).

## Marcelo A. Garcia



Marcelo Garcia (Photo: Courtesy of Marcelo Garcia)

- **Address:** 1790 Wendy Way, Neenah
- **Age:** 53
- **Occupation:** Public employee
- **Highest education level:** Associate degree in speech therapy

- **Family:** Married with two children, who currently or formerly attended the Neenah Joint School District
- **Relevant experience:** Former board member and Board president of Madison Community of Cooperatives in Madison. Co-founder, former board member and board president of Casa Hispana in Appleton. Former chair of AFSCME Chapter 15. Former ELL paraprofessional at Neenah Joint School District and Menasha School District.

### **Why are you running for school board?**

I'm running for school board to continue my service to the community by bringing a new perspective to the board and to advocate for teachers and students. As a parent and constituent of the Neenah Joint School District, I want to bring more awareness to the community about our district and open up more lines of communication between the administration, board, teachers, students and the community. I've been an active member in organizations throughout the community. I've volunteered at Fox Valley Literacy Coalition, Fox Crossing Park and Rec Department and the Neenah Soccer Club. In 2006, I co-founded Casa Hispana, a non-profit organization serving the Hispanic community.

### **What makes you the best candidate in this race?**

Everyone running for the school board is running because they want to give it back to the community. What sets me apart from the other candidates is my experience serving on a co-op housing board and a non-profit board. My presence on Neenah Joint School Board will bring diversity and a fresh perspective to solve the district's issues.

### **What do residents tell you is the top issue for the school district right now, and how would you address it?**

Public education has been under attack for the last few years. It began with Act 10 and expansion of the voucher program, which takes money from public schools and diverts it to private schools. As for Neenah Joint School District, the most visible and contentious issue at this time is dealing with aging infrastructure. For the second consecutive year, the district is asking its residents to approve a referendum. As a member of the board, I will make sure there is a short-term and a long-term plan for maintenance of our buildings in order to avoid a situation like the present.

## **Tom Hanby**

- **Address:** 706 E. Forest Ave., Neenah
- **Age:** Not provided

- **Occupation:** Carpenter
- **Highest education level:** High school graduate
- **Family:** Married with two adult children and two granddaughters
- **Relevant experience:** Previously filled a Neenah Joint School District vacancy for a year

### **Why are you running for school board?**

I'm running to create a grassroots effort within the Neenah school community to provide a welcoming environment where everyone's voice will be heard regarding the policies and operations of our schools, and to encourage the community to provide ideas and feedback regarding current and upcoming issues facing the district.

### **What makes you the best candidate in this race?**

I am extremely interested in the programming, operations and financial situation of our schools. Therefore, I have regularly attended school board meetings since 2004. As such, I am informed on most issues facing the school district.

### **What do residents tell you is the top issue for the school district right now, and how would you address it?**

The largest viable issue for the school district today is the upcoming referendum, which will be decided April 7 at the ballot box. If the referendum passes, monitor the process to be sure the community gets an excellent result for the money spent. If it does not pass, start a transparent community conversation to determine what the community wants and will financially support and in good faith examine and report on ideas generated by the community groups.

## **Amy Morrissey**



Amy Morrissey (Photo: Courtesy of Amy Morrissey)

- **Address:** 1261 Lynrose Lane, Neenah
- **Age:** 44
- **Occupation:** Clinical Therapist
- **Highest education level:** Master's degree in counseling
- **Family:** Married with 2 school-aged children, including one currently at Shattuck Middle School.
- **Relevant experience:** Throughout my career I have worked in a domestic violence shelter, a county behavioral health unit and currently an outpatient mental health clinic. Within these positions I have also provided on site consultation and outpatient mental health services for several early childhood and elementary schools.

### **Why are you running for school board?**

I want to help foster positive change in the NJSD. I want physically safer schools and to continue to build programs that support students health and wellness, in junction with meeting educational expectations and achievements.

### **What makes you the best candidate in this race?**

I have a strong understanding of child development and what is needed to help support children and adolescents so they can grow up to be healthy productive adults. I believe I can help guide the board to make informed decisions and balance the needs of the students, teachers and the community.

### **What do residents tell you is the top issue for the school district right now, and how would you address it?**

The physical safety of the school buildings is what I am hearing most about. As a parent of students in the NJSD, I also feel this is a pressing matter. When the referendum is passed I want to help the board make informed decisions to address these concerns without waste.

## **Deborah Watry**



Deborah Watry (Photo: Courtesy of Deborah Watry)

- **Address:** 1828 Highland Dr., Neenah
- **Age:** 68
- **Occupation:** University professor
- **Highest education level:** Doctorate in educational administration
- **Family:** Married with three adult children and four grandchildren
- **Relevant experience:** Incumbent school board member: Involved in planning for Neenah School District referendum; member of the School Board Legislative and Policy Committees, developed policy resolutions for Wisconsin school improvement and safety, spoke at the Wisconsin Budget Hearing in Green Bay for support for increased funding for public education and mental health services, involved in advocating for public education with state and local legislators

#### **Why are you running for school board?**

I truly care about all students and their learning environments. I want what is best for their future and for the community. Investing in our children now means a vibrant future for the Neenah community. I am running for school board because great schools and teachers made a difference in my own life. I know that these same elements can make a difference for the children in this community. As an educator, I have helped thousands of students (both adults and youths) succeed, and on the school board I will bring this passion and experience to help even more.

#### **What makes you the best candidate in this race?**

I have been involved in education for over 45 years. My experiences as a community member, parent, teacher, coach, administrator and now as a professor working with new teachers, and administrators, allows me to have a pulse on education in Wisconsin and in

the local community. My qualifications (lifetime licenses in teaching, building administration, curriculum and instruction, school business management, pupil services director and district administration) and educational experiences benefit me in making solid decisions regarding the operations and functions of a school district.

**What do residents tell you is the top issue for the school district right now, and how would you address it?**

The district should focus on creating safe and optimal learning facilities to meet the needs of all learners and provide adequate 21st century learning opportunities. Current facilities at the elementary schools do not provide ideal learning environments to address such issues as safety and security; and proper learning space for special education, English language learners, music, and art. The over 90-year-old middle school has outlived its function and cannot provide an adequate 21st century learning environment for middle school students. The high school also is in need of updating to provide for futuristic learning environments for its students.

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