

Seven vie for six Easthampton school committee seats

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER

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EASTHAMPTON - Seven city residents are seeking election to six seats on the School Committee.

One former member resigned this year, and two longtime members are not seeking reelection. Three incumbents - Thomas Brown, Brian Fink and Tammy Kuycht - are running again, saying they have more to do for the schools. Four relative newcomers - LaDonna Crow, Peter Gunn, Lori Ingraham, and Eric Yates each cited concerns about the board's failure to reach a quorum twice recently as part of their reason for running. All of the candidates have children who previously attended or are currently attending Easthampton schools. The election is Nov. 6 with polling places open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Here is a snapshot of the candidates:

Thomas Brown

Seeking reelection to a fourth term.

Age: 53

Address: 5 Robin Road.

Occupation: senior vice president, Easthampton Savings Bank.

Family: wife, Diane Brown; children, Christopher Brown, 32, Amy Brown, 30, Sarah Harrington, 28, Lena Brown, 25 and Justin Brown, 23.

Community involvement: chairman of the Economic Development Commission; member of the board of directors for the Council on Aging; School Building Committee; Master Planning Committee.

School committee tenure: six years, third term

Why running again: "I firmly believe that the community is only as strong as its school system. There's a huge ripple-effect benefit for a community with a strong school system. People will want to live here and find employment. I believe in the value of education that is being provided and received in the city. We have a strong administrative team and exceptional teachers. I would put our education program up against any other community in the valley."

Matters you'd like to address: "First and foremost are facilities - a new elementary school and major renovation to the high school. We need state-of-the-art, up-to-date facilities to provide that quality education in. We have very old buildings and very dated systems. White Brook Middle School is our newest facility and I think it's almost 40 years old."

Brian Fink

Seeking reelection to a second term

Age: 62

Address: 30 Oliver St.

Occupation: teacher, Tri-County Schools, East Street; retired principal from Maple

Elementary School and former K-4 Parsons Street School, now a special education school.

Family: wife, Karen Fink; children, Todd Fink, 32 and Brad Fink, 28

Community involvement: finance subcommittee of school board.

School committee tenure: two years, first term.

Why running again: "There are a lot of decisions that need to be made. We accomplished the professionalizing of food services. Prior to two years ago, it usually would run in the red. I was in favor of looking for new requirements for the director of food services position. Now the report is we're selling more lunches and making more money."

Matters you'd like to address: "I want to hear from the community. Ultimately, they're the taxpayers. The pool issue is a community issue. There are no more swim programs. The Barracudas team concluded its program last year. The finances available are \$200,000 for pool repair. That's not sufficient. The bill is much more extensive than that. I'd hate to see it go the way of the tennis courts."

Tammy Kuchyt

Seeking reelection to a sixth term.

Age: 41

Address: 364 East St.

Occupation: owner, Waves Salon, Northampton

Family: husband, Stanley Kuchyt; children Ashleigh Kuchyt, 21 and Tara Kuchyt, sophomore at Easthampton High School.

Community involvement: building committee for eight years.

School committee tenure: 10 years, fifth term

Why running again: "My daughter is still in school. I have two little cousins coming up through the rank. It's basically all about the kids. I don't think a lot of things are done properly and that's why I'm staying aboard."

Matters you'd like to address: "I'd like to see all our students get bused. I'd like to see technology and renovations at the high school, White Brook Middle School and elementary schools. I'd also like to see a new elementary building come in. I don't think the kids get what they deserve right now."

LaDonna Crow

Age: 40

Address: 13 Holyoke St.

Occupation: production planner, Channing L. Bete Co., South Deerfield

Family: husband, Clay Crow; son, Austin Crow, seventh-grader at White Brook Middle School

Community involvement: PTO Maple Elementary School, 2003; volunteer, greater easthampton chamber of commerce; Easthampton parks and recreation youth soccer coach for two years, youth basketball coach for one year and assistant basketball coach for one year.

Why running: "I'm running for Easthampton School Committee because after learning of three vacant seats and no-quorum meetings, I feared education was a low priority in our

city. We need people on the committee that will make our school district and the students a top priority. Nothing is more important to me than making sure our kids are prepared for life after high school."

Matters you'd like to address: "Quality education and MCAS scores should continue to improve. The lunch menu could use work: more fruits and vegetables, less starchy foods. Snacks, sodas and unhealthy foods are a growing trend throughout the country. Kids get enough of that out-side of school. I'd like to explore the possibility of extending the school day at least an hour. With MCAS there are more requirements for schools and they get crammed in. The day just really isn't long enough. Teachers could provide more one-on-one time with students if there's the time for it."

Peter Gunn

Age: 45

Address: 8 Brewster Ave.

Occupation: history, economics and government teacher at the Williston Northampton School; Smith College part-time history lecturer.

Community involvement: district coordinator for "We the People," a program funded by the U.S. Department of Education, at the Center for Civic Education, based in Calabasas, Ca; youth soccer and baseball coach

Why running: "I care about kids, know a little about education and I'm willing to serve. I've met a lot of kids I really like. There was a time when, 10 to 15 years ago, parents with school-aged children wanted to leave Easthampton. Now they want to stay."

Matters you'd like to address: "The biggest matter is to keep positive momentum. I worked on the override for Easthampton schools to make them better than they were about two years ago. I support foreign language being taught after school and access to technology that is driven by the teachers' desire, not just because we think we need it. Teachers know what they need and want. We should find out specifically how teachers want to use new technology and then get it."

Lori Ingraham

Age: 40

Address: 22 Picard Circle

Occupation: assistant treasurer, Easthampton Savings Bank

Family: husband, David Ingraham; children, Jessica Ingraham, fifth-grader, and Jacob Ingraham, eighth-grader both at White Brook Middle School

Community involvement: management committee for Friends of Hampshire County Homeless Individuals; planning committee, Hampshire County Relay for Life; Sunday School superintendent for the Westhampton Congregational Church.

Why running: "I had been on the Center and Pepin school councils and I decided it was time to step up. I was a parent representative and worked for the elementary schools' budget so I've seen what we have to do, which then goes on to the school committee."

Matters you'd like to address: "I want to be a voice for parents. People are aware of who I am, and I want to be the one they can talk to. The school committee can help make schools be the best they can possibly be with the money that we have."

Eric Yates

Age: 36

Address: 27 Garfield Ave.,

Occupation: fundraiser, Amherst College

Family: wife, Kara McElhone; children, Eva McElhone Yates, third-grader at Center Elementary School and Ruby McElhone Yates, pre-schooler at Arcadia Nature Nursery School

Community involvement: Committee for Better Schools; School Council for Center and Pepin schools, from 2005 to 2006.

Why running: "I thought it was important that more people be involved in the school committee. We've lived in town for nine years and we got really invested in the schools. We care about them. Part of the school committee role is to get a full sense of the fiscal boundaries. I want to know about the current financial state of our schools. Parents and people in the community are concerned about the facilities. I supported the override campaign a couple years ago. I can't say that I would be nearly as passionate about the whole topic if not for our daughters."

Matters you'd like to address: "The town's lost a lot of students to school choice. I think some of that's a perception issue. Students will live up to their best potential and whatever that is, I think it's important that they stay in the school district. Safety is an important issue and is different in all the facilities. The community can play a role in how we make certain decisions about allocating scarce resources and I'd like to be a part of that."

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