

Nick Lenhardt

nrl003@yahoo.com

March 11, 2024

DMPS (Des Moines Public Schools) Board of Directors Vacancy

ATTN: Rosie Rios

2100 Fleur Drive

Des Moines, IA 50321

rosa.rios@dmschools.org

Dear school board members,

I am writing to express my interest in the district 4 Board Position at Des Moines Public Schools. With my passion for advocating for the successful outcomes of all students at Des Moines Public Schools I am confident in my ability to contribute effectively towards the community's vision and values. Specifically, I will describe how I will advocate and represent the community in the following draft Board goals and guardrails:

- **Goal 1 – Literacy and Goal 2 – Career and College Ready: –Due to challenges at home,** I was raised by my grandparents. Despite not completing high school themselves, they instilled in me the belief that every child deserves a chance to excel through education. As the first college graduate in my family, I understand the transformative power of education. I came from very modest means and from a community where many did not even graduate high school. Education allowed me to see a path forward in my life and I am committed to ensuring all students have the same opportunities via public education.. I believe the only way to rise from the circumstances a child is born into is to excel in education. This starts with literacy. I believe the investment in literacy is crucial for closing educational gaps and setting students up for long term success. As the literacy outcomes for our students at DMPS rise, students will begin to thrive which is why these two goals are so intertwined. Our students succeed in literacy they will become more career and college ready. Literacy is more than fundamental it is critical to ensuring our students are ready for the next phase of their lives. I have three boys of my own currently going through their DMPS journey and I will do everything in my ability to ensure not only my own boys are successful at DMPS, but all their peers will be as well.
- **Guardrail 1 – Equity:** Equity, in essence, is about fairness and ensuring everyone has access to the same opportunities and resources, regardless of their background or circumstances. It's not just about treating everyone the same, but rather acknowledging and addressing the unique barriers and challenges individuals face to level the playing field. I could not be more passionate about this topic. I have two brief stories that I'd like to share. First of all, I have observed first hand in my parents-in-law, who are both blind, how certain groups are underserved and face significant obstacles in their daily lives. From things that are significant like lack of transportation to inconveniences like

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

inaccessible menus at a restaurant, these experiences highlight the importance of advocating for equity to address these unmet needs and ensure that everyone can fully participate in society. Unfortunately, many blind children and even some adults are illiterate. They are provided audiobooks over being taught braille. Their needs are not being addressed due to their disability. And they are not given access to the same opportunities or resources to address their unique needs.

I have also experienced challenges with equity first hand in my own child's experience at DMPS. My oldest son is an advanced learner. With so much emphasis on the underachieving student within the school day, it has become increasingly apparent to me that the advanced learner can easily be left behind, especially in the middle school years. My son was so bored during his school day that he would plead to not go to school each day of 6th and 7th grade. He was experiencing boreout also known as chronic boredom. He carried that exhaustion from boredom home with him every day. You see, boreout has the same impact as burnout. He was fatigued, lacked interest in activities that usually cause him joy and was generally disgruntled. He would complete his assignments in class each day and be left to fill his time on his own. His teachers acknowledged this issue but indicated their lack of ability to differentiate learning for him while they are struggling to get the rest of the class to the mean. Half way through the first semester of 7th grade, my son started to check out. That is when I had to intervene. We were able to work with the math teacher, APL consultant and other administrators to successfully assess our son and advance his math class a grade mid-semester. We continue to work with him and the school to identify ways for him to fill his free time throughout the day. He is doing well in 8th grade math and feeling more challenged. Unfortunately, I feel like we would have had a different outcome without advocating for this change.

My personal connection to inequities through both my parents-in-law and my son underscores the importance of empathy and understanding diverse situations. By recognizing and actively working towards equity, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment where everyone has opportunities to thrive.

- **Guardrail 2 – Social and Emotional Learning:** Social-emotional learning is just as crucial as literacy in equipping individuals with essential life skills. SEL prepares individuals to cope with challenges, communicate effectively and contribute positively to society. SEL helps students develop skills as goal setting, perseverance and cooperation which are all important to academic success and ultimately contribute to an individual's executive function long-term. Again, learning through my own personal experiences in raising children, there is so much connectivity between SEL and academic learning. The connectivity is not dissimilar to the connection of mental health to physical health – both are important.
- **Guardrail 3 – DEI:** My wife is a graduate of Lincoln High School and went on to attend Simpson College. Simpson College draws many of its students from in and around Iowa.

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

With much of Iowa being rural, much of the student population is from a small town in Iowa. My wife became very aware of how her public school education at DMPS prepared her for college once she realized the limited exposure and perception of differences in individuals that her new peers shared. She often speaks of the exposure that she had as a child to different socioeconomic factors, race and religion as the corner stone for her being able to deal with different situations. For that reason, we chose to move from Ankeny to Des Moines and to place our kids in the DMPS district. We acknowledged that there would be equivalent academic opportunities. I would even suggest superior opportunities at DMPS with Central Academy and Central Campus offerings. More than anything, we knew that DMPS would provide exposure to diversity in race, socioeconomic status, language, ethnicity and culture. Through such exposure, our children would gain an understanding of differences. They would approach such differences with curiosity and free of bias. Most of all, they would gain appreciation and even empathy for such unique differences and related challenges that are present. I have already seen the benefits of this exposure.

I'd like to share a few examples of experiences my sons have had in this area. My oldest son, Kingston, sat next to an African boy in 6th grade. He had just arrived in Iowa from Kenya and spoke Swahili. He would speak Swahili to those sitting next to him when he needed help. Kingston told me a lot of kids would just laugh at him. Kingston attempted to talk to him and overtime created a friendship with this other boy. He would come home and look up words in Swahili in an attempt to talk to the kid each day. I admired his willingness to help and the deep empathy he showed by considering this boy's challenges and coming up with ways to help. That same year in 6th grade, Kingston let me know that one of his friends texted him that he didn't have any groceries over Christmas break and asked if we could send him some groceries. We were in Florida but Kingston reminded me that we can have Walmart deliver it to them while we were away. We sent groceries and his friend sent pictures showing the excitement on this families faces as they saw things such as bananas and Cheerios. This was another exposure that I couldn't have thought of a way to teach on my own. The final example that I will share is a unique friendship of my youngest son, Colton, and Natalia. Colton is in first grade. Natalia is a refugee from Ukraine that came to Iowa only speaking Russia. When Colton first spoke of Natalia, she was the girl that sits by him but doesn't ever talk. Natalia and Colton bonded over their love for math. Colton would try his best to speak to Natalia as they worked on projects together. Overtime, Natalia was speaking to Colton and then to the entire class. Colton's teacher attributes Colton for making Natalia feel comfortable and helping her realize that her barriers could be overcome. These are the kind of human experience that I want for my children that DMPS provides and should continue to focus on.

- **Guardrail 4 – Safety:** We need to have school buildings and facilities that are innovative and present a warm and welcoming environment for our students and our staff. I do believe our buildings need to have safety top of mind, but I have also observed that safety can create fear that can be limiting. For example, it has come to my attention that some middle schools do not allow kids to go outside during the school day because they do not feel as though they have adequate safety measures in their outdoor space. I have been

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

advocating for solutions but the fear seems to prohibit the staff from taking steps forward to make this change a reality. I believe secure facilities are important and safety plans need to be in place and practiced. I do not, however, believe that we need solutions to address ongoing fear that prohibits us from allowing students to have experiences that support their growth and overall health.

- **Guardrail 5 – Engagement:** I have personally been very engaged in the path of Des Moines Public Schools through my role as PTA president, leading many Jefferson community events, a member of the reimaging education work, a coach of several youth sports in Des Moines. It is pivotal that you have a strong group of parents, students, and community members continuously engaged on the path of DMPS. By doing so, you build feedback loops to ensure we are still moving forward in the direction the community supports. I have built these loops in various roles and would love the opportunity to do so with DMPS.

I have attached my resume for your review. I am eager to discuss how my skills and experiences align with the needs of DMPS and how I can contribute to its continued success.

Thank you for considering my application. I look forward to the possibility of discussing this exciting opportunity with you further.

Warm regards,

Nick Lenhardt

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE