

MERCER ISLAND REPORTER

NEWS

School Board Director Position 1, Ananta Gudipaty vs. Cristina Martinez

By [Andy Nystrom](#) • October 21, 2023 8:30 am



Ananta Gudipaty and Cristina Martinez. Courtesy photos

Ananta Gudipaty and Cristina Martinez are running for Position 1 on the Mercer Island School Board in the Nov. 7 general election.

With children in local schools and more than two decades of leadership experience at Microsoft and Amazon, Gudipaty has a deep passion for educational transformation in the schools and corporate realms.

Within the Island school district realm, Martinez — who is an early childhood educator and a public health consultant — has served as a member of the Superintendent Teaching & Learning Advisory and the Superintendent Equity Advisory Council, co-vice president of Diversity Equity & Inclusion for the MI PTA Council and more.

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GUDIPATY

*** Why are you running for Mercer Island School District board director?**

I want every child to discover their innate, infinite potential; this is my life’s mission.

I had the privilege of working with distinguished educators from around the world, witnessing incredibly powerful programs that transformed the bottom 10% of students in a country into the top 10% within a mere four years. I had the opportunity to contribute to impactful educational initiatives in both public and private school settings and to work directly with hundreds of students in our community and beyond.

The success pattern remains consistent: when we inspire each child with excellent academic resources, empower them with the unconditional support of a loving community, and equip them with the skills and confidence necessary to excel on the global stage, they can achieve the seemingly impossible. We are incredibly fortunate that we possess all three of these elements in abundance within our beautiful community. The children of Mercer Island should thrive, and our schools should serve as a model for our state and beyond. This is my wish, my conviction, and my motivation for running for the school board.

When my family and I moved to Mercer Island during the height of the pandemic, the school administration's meticulous attention deeply impressed us. The district office welcomed us with a phone call. The school principals reached out to ensure our needs were met. The IT teams assisted us with any technical issues, displaying a remarkable dedication that exceeded our experiences, even at private schools. It was then that we realized we were in a truly special place. My run for the school board is an opportunity to give back to this exceptional community.

*** What do you feel are three of the most critical issues within the school district and how do you hope to address them?**

The mental health and self-confidence of students, the fiscal health and long-term sustainability of our school system, and the well-being and empowerment of our teachers are the critical issues within the district. I also believe that these are deeply interrelated issues and can be addressed in conjunction with carefully crafted efforts. But we must begin with understanding the root cause.

The struggles of our students — their search for identity, their inability to feel belonging and hope — are prominent in contemporary discourse. While we may be quick to blame social media, technology, policy, or even societal pressures, are these really the root cause? I have observed that a self-confident, self-reliant child has the inner strength necessary to not be affected by these external pressures. Have we focused on helping our children develop their inner strength? Have we given them the tools to find themselves and their humanity, and in that process, see the humanity of all those around them? Have we given them the vision to see the world around them as an ally and not as an impediment? Have we helped them develop self-esteem and self-confidence in a global society? We are often the designers of the very problems we struggle with.

We are not solving the unsolved. We don't need to invent new solutions. There are numerous innovative programs around the world with proven strategies for addressing student health and increasing academic excellence. We simply need to pick up their playbook and run with it, iteratively refining the implementation until our students are bubbling with enthusiasm and excellence.

As we create this nurturing and empowering environment, we will see the results reflected in our metrics and standings in the broader community. Such positive changes will fuel enrollment and, at least partially, address the fiscal concerns. We will pair this with other factors that may be influencing enrollment to create a positive cycle.

In my 20-plus years in business and technology, I have found that there is no shortage of money for innovative educational programs. In fact, few industries are blessed with the kind of angel investments and funding as educational initiatives. With the support of the highly educated, successful, and connected Mercer Island community, I can see many paths to help us tap into grants and funding to augment our programs.

Teaching has become a progressively harder profession with ever-increasing job requirements. In addition to the core tasks of inspiring and educating, we have piled on the assessment of each child's physical and mental well-being with a ratio of one teacher assessing 150 children! This itself sounds like a full-time job. We also require teachers to explore and implement innovative programs, learn the latest technology, and keep all parents well-informed with regular communication. Are the job requirements practical for any individual? What suffers because of this overload?

How can the community help? Every professional I know understands the power of education and would love to contribute in some way. The challenge is that we don't have mechanisms to leverage their skills and take some load off our teachers. We also need technology investments that remove the need for teachers to grade or send communications. We need teaching tools that empower them and not burden them with more tasks. We live in the software capital of the world. Let's partner with these transformative companies and drive these technological advancements. The possibilities are limited only by our imagination.

Together we can overcome these critical issues and pave the way for a bright future.

*** What’s your life philosophy and how can you apply that to school district matters?**

The world is a reflection of our mind. Each of us has the infinite potential to transform ourselves and the world around us. How much we leverage that potential depends on our outlook. If we see problems and insurmountable challenges, we will feel dejected and depressed. On the other hand, if we see them as opportunities, we will feel energized and empowered to bring about positive change.

In a world grappling with division and the existential crisis of climate change, I see a tremendous need for selfless leaders who can innovate, transform, unite, and elevate. For example, we’ve spent the last 150 years fighting to conquer nature, inadvertently creating an environmental catastrophe. There’s significant opportunity in changing that perspective to one of cooperation, collaboration, and coexistence. I see 100 years of innovation ahead in respecting and coexisting with nature.

My vision for education is to inspire our children to work for the betterment of the world. I want them to have a lofty purpose beyond themselves and, in doing so, find a path of self-refinement and service to society.

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MARTINEZ

*** Why are you running for Mercer Island School District board director?**

I am running for Mercer Island School District board director because I believe in the power of quality education to shape the future of our community. As a parent deeply invested in our district, I am committed to ensuring that every child receives an outstanding education tailored to their needs. With a background as a physician, public health professional, and educator, I bring a unique perspective to the table. My experience equips me to understand the community’s diverse needs and advocate for comprehensive solutions, all while leveraging and bolstering the district’s existing strengths.

My approach centers on an “upstream” strategy, aiming to tackle issues at their root for lasting impact, including critical challenges from budget, to academic, and social well-being, met with innovative and courageous solutions. Through my involvement in advisory groups and leadership roles within the PTA Council, I have built a track record of effective collaboration, sharpening my ability to actively listen and make informed decisions based on concrete criteria. Data-driven decision-making is fundamental for ensuring the highest quality education, and I am dedicated to using empirical evidence to guide academic and budgetary decisions. My ultimate goal is to create an inclusive educational environment where every student feels supported and empowered to thrive.

*** What do you feel are three of the most critical issues within the school district and how do you hope to address them?**

The most critical challenges within our school district include financial stability, educational quality, and student well-being.

First, we must navigate budget constraints and address the long-term facility plan. The current funding model presents a significant challenge in meeting the diverse needs of our students, requiring collaborative efforts with fellow board members and advocacy at the state level for comprehensive funding, particularly for special education programs. Additionally, ensuring compliance of older school buildings with state regulations and having a well-structured long-term facility plan in place is crucial. By engaging with stakeholders and seeking sustainable solutions, we can benefit both our community and schools in the long run, while also preserving the cherished close-knit environment and strong community ties that smaller neighborhood schools provide.

The second most pressing issue confronting our school district is ensuring that our academic curriculums are not only relevant and rigorous but also equipped to cater to the diverse learning needs of all students, including those who learn differently, thereby providing them with the necessary tools for success. I am wholeheartedly committed to advocating for academic excellence, with a particular emphasis on preparing students for the evolving landscape of future careers, which will be marked by rapid technological advancements, artificial intelligence, and groundbreaking scientific discoveries. It’s imperative to acknowledge that today’s students will navigate a world of knowledge at an unprecedented pace, necessitating a solid foundation to not only adapt but also to thrive. This involves creating opportunities tailored to students with unique learning styles and implementing a curriculum that mirrors the varied backgrounds and experiences

within our community. Additionally, including the arts as an important subject is crucial in fostering creativity, self-expression, and a well-rounded education. The arts play a vital role in enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving, and cultural appreciation, all of which are essential skills for success in the 21st century.

The third critical challenge facing our school district is giving top priority to mental health for all students and creating a strong sense of belonging within the district. Understanding how crucial mental well-being is, we must realize that a child's ability to learn and do well in school is closely connected to their mental health. In our fast-changing world, our children need to build resilience, arming them with the skills and knowledge to not just cope, but to succeed over future challenges, while also knowing when and where to seek help. Like a well-maintained machine, without proper care, performance inevitably declines over time. That's why it's vital to address students' academic, social, and mental health needs comprehensively. This is essential for them not only to handle changes in their environment and society, but to truly grow and thrive.

*** What's your life philosophy and how can you apply that to school district matters?**

My life philosophy aligns closely with the quote by Robert Baden-Powell, "Try and leave this world a little better than you found it, and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate, you have not wasted your time but have done your best." I firmly believe that we should strive to make a positive impact on the world around us and leave it better than we found it.

In the context of the school district matters, this philosophy translates into a commitment to provide every child with an outstanding education. I believe that by dedicating our time and efforts to improving the educational opportunities and support systems for our students, we can help them reach their full potential and create a better future for our community. It's not just about fulfilling our roles and responsibilities; it's about going the extra mile to ensure that each child's educational experience, regardless of their learning differences or life experiences, is exceptional. By doing so, we not only contribute to the betterment of our community but also leave a legacy of positive change for generations to come.

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