

**NEWS**

# San Rafael school board race: 3 candidates, 2 seats

By **KERI BRENNER** | kbrenner@marinij.com | Marin Independent Journal  
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Two incumbents on the San Rafael City Schools board of trustees are being challenged in the Nov. 6 elections by a third candidate with education and nonprofit administration experience.

Challenger Jon Marker is vying to unseat one of two incumbents, Rachel Kertz and Natu Tuatagaloa, who are both seeking re-election to four-year terms on the board.

San Rafael City Schools is a sprawling, K-12 district that has [more than 7,200 students](#) in eight elementary schools, a middle school, a K-8 school, two comprehensive 9-12 high schools and one continuation school.

Kertz, 51, a San Rafael resident since 1999, is director of strategic programs for the Belvedere Tiburon Library Foundation. First elected to the SRCS board in 2013, she is seeking re-election to a second term, after serving as board vice president in 2014 and president in both 2015 and 2016.

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She said she is a proponent of “looking at the whole family, not just test scores,” in order to ensure equity in educational opportunities and support across the district.

“San Rafael City Schools covers the whole socioeconomic spectrum,” she said. She said she is seeing successes in the district through creating community partnerships to support all the student programs — from English language learners through middle school and high school.

“Our community partners are integral to supporting us and funding us and supporting the work that we’re doing,” Kertz said.

Kertz also supports recent investments to the counseling and athletic programs at Davidson Middle School, where new personnel were hired.

She and other district officials are waiting for the state to release the final test score data from last year, after having met with all the principals of each school to review preliminary results. She said she thinks the district is going in a positive direction, although more work is needed.

“You have to look at the trend over three years,” she said. “We know it takes a lot of time — we implement and we see results over a period of time. It’s important to continue to invest in the programs we have, stay committed and follow those through.”

She said she did not support charter schools, which were “not right for our community,” she said.

Marker, 33, is the CEO of Youth Leadership Institute, a statewide educational nonprofit working with 2,000 youth across California... A former eighth-grade history teacher, Marker has worked to help staff math, science, foreign language and bilingual educators roles across 60 schools and secured \$3 million in federal funding to recruit and retain these educators. He also was a former program director at the education-focused Jim Joseph Foundation.

If elected to the board, Marker said, he could contribute “a key focus” on data analysis that “would bring a meaningful lens to our school board.” He said his skills in data analysis would help the district set stronger goals to improve student performance levels, which he said are declining.

“This campaign is not a critique of the teachers,” Marker said. “We want to shine a light on the great work teachers are doing — and the way we can do that is by setting strong and clear benchmarks for student learning.”

He said he has attended board meetings and reviewed minutes and “I didn’t see anyone asking questions (about test results) or setting rigorous goals.”

“I want someone to have that skill set on the board,” he said.

Although there were a few “bright spots” — such as at Short and Venetia Valley elementary schools for math and Venetia Valley for literacy — Marker cited results of a state California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress test presented at the Dec. 18 board meeting.

“The graduation rates are flat, and the student achievement rate is decreasing,” he said. “We need to set some goals.”

He also cited a report by the nonprofit [Marin Promise](#) that indicates a decline in student performance levels as relates to college entrance. He said he would align high school graduation requirements to the California State University and University of California entrance requirements, which is also known as the “A to G” requirements.

Also, for students who choose not to go to college, he would support “aligning our graduation requirements with strong career and technical education.”

He also is against charter schools.

“They were originally organized to do innovation,” he said. “We can do it within the district.”

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Tuatagaloa, 52, has served on the board for 16 years, and is seeking re-election to his fifth term, having first been first elected in 2001. A San Rafael native and 1984 alumnus of San Rafael High School, Tuatagaloa is a former University of California, Berkeley, varsity football player and was a National Football League defensive lineman for the Cincinnati Bengals, Seattle Seahawks, New Orleans Saints and Houston Oilers.

He currently runs his own strategic management consulting firm offering services to design and build construction, electrical, telecommunications and other related companies.

He said the biggest challenge in the district is to improve overall student achievement levels “across a diverse learning population,” from English language learners to high performers. He said the “goal is for teachers in the classroom to develop trust and a relationship with their students, so that students have a sense of belonging and that they’re cared about.”

“My thought is — and research shows — that the social-emotional learning aspect (is key),” he said. “Where does it occur? It occurs in the classroom, and when that happens, the learning happens.”

He said he supports equity in education, with one caveat: “Equity does not mean that everyone gets the same; equity means that some kids need more to get the same. How do we get our underperformers to rise up and our high performers to be challenged?”

He said he was “not a fan” of charter schools, “especially those that sit outside (the district) and take our resources.” He said programs can be created within the district to meet the needs of kids so that outside charters are not necessary.

All three candidates have strong educational and family backgrounds.

Kertz, a 10-year member of the board of the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center in San Rafael, has been an active classroom and fundraising volunteer in the Dixie School District. Most recently, Kertz served on the steering committee for the successful passage of the Measures A and B campaign to continue funding for local San Rafael City Schools.

Kertz and husband Loren have a son, Ryan, at Terra Linda High School and another son, Nathan, who graduated from Terra Linda. She holds a master’s degree in business administration from San Francisco State University.

Endorsements include: Mary Jane Burke, Marin County superintendent of schools; Dixie School District board president Brad Honsberger; San Rafael Mayor Gary Phillips and Councilwoman Kate Colin; Rep. Jared Huffman; Marin County Supervisor Damon Connolly; and many others.

Marker, who has two children who will be entering San Rafael City Schools, has a master's degree in secondary education and social studies from American University. In his current post as CEO of Youth Leadership Institute, he manages a staff of 50 working with 1,700 youths annually, and has grown the budget 136 percent in three and a half years.

He is endorsed by Rep. Jared Huffman; Marin Supervisor Dennis Rodoni; San Rafael City Council members Kate Colin, John Gamblin, Maribeth Bushey and Andrew McCullough; Novato Councilman Eric Lucan; Anna Pletcher, Marin County district attorney candidate; and many others.

Tuatagaloa spent his whole educational life attending city schools, starting with Glenwood pre-school, San Pedro Elementary School, Santa Venetia Middle School and finally San Rafael High School. His three children are also current or former attendees of San Rafael schools: Tianna is a 2004 graduate of San Rafael High School, Malia is a 2016 graduate of San Rafael High School, and McKenna attends San Rafael High School. His wife Judy Tuatagaloa is a fourth-generation San Rafael resident and 1986 graduate of San Rafael High School. Judy is also a HeadsUp Foundation board member and a fifth-grade teacher at Bel Aire Elementary School in Tiburon.

Tuatagaloa is endorsed by Burke, the superintendent of schools; San Rafael's mayor and council members; Marin County supervisors Connolly and Judy Arnold; Huffman; and numerous other leaders in education and government.

## The candidates

### Rachel Kertz

Age: 51

Occupation: Program director, Belvedere Tiburon Library Foundation

Education: Bachelor's degree, University of California, Santa Cruz; master's degree, San Francisco State University

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Experience: Four years, San Rafael City Schools board; Dixie School District classroom and fundraising volunteer; 10 years on the Osher Marin JCC board; steering committee, Measure A and B campaigns

## Jon Marker

Age: 33

Occupation: CEO, Youth Leadership Institute

Education: Bachelor's degree, political science, Boston University; master's degree, secondary education, social studies, American University

Experience: Eighth-grade history teacher; program director, Jim Joseph Foundation; board member Marin Promise, Marin Kids, Congregation Rodef Sholom and Funding the Next Generation.

## Natu Tuatagaloa

Age: 52

Occupation: Consultant

Education: Bachelor's degree, University of California, Berkeley

Experience: Sixteen years on the San Rafael City Schools board

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## Keri Brenner

Keri Brenner is a reporter covering K-12 and higher education.

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