

MCMC Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire 2024 Primary Election Cycle

The Montgomery County Muslim Council (MCMC) invites you to answer this candidate questionnaire and return it to us by **Friday, April 12, 2024**. Please return responses to president@mcmcmd.org. Responses may be made public.

Candidate Name: Laura Stewart

Submitted By: Laura Stewart

Date: 4/12

1. Addressing Islamophobia and Ensuring Muslim Representation: How will you address Islamophobia within the school system, ensuring that the concerns of Muslim students and families are heard and addressed effectively?

All children and staff need to feel safe in school. The Anti-Hate Task Force recommendations for schools should be fully implemented including a robust reporting mechanism, mandatory anti-Islamophobia content for professional development, inclusive curriculum including Muslim and Arab representation, upstander/bystander training including examples of bullying, avoiding tropes and stereotypes in classroom activities, and using the USDE best practices to create safe spaces for faithful practice.

Every school should have a safety and school climate action team that includes representation of the entire diverse school community. We need better surveys and then the team could go deeper into the issues and identify possible solutions, like better communication to students on reporting methods or the need for extra security near bathrooms where bullying can occur.

All reports of hate must be taken seriously, and I will work to improve conditions for Muslim students.

2. Unique Qualifications and Distinction: What unique qualifications do you possess that distinguish you from other candidates running for the Board of Education?

I have worked tirelessly as an education advocate for over 10 years. This experience will give me the knowledge and connections I need to be an effective board member. I've held positions both in PTA and other community and state boards that work to improve young people's lives, including Woodlin ES PTA President, Einstein Cluster Coordinator, Capital Improvements Chair, MCCPTA VP of Advocacy, Down County Consortium Area Vice President, Free State PTA VP for Advocacy, Safe Healthy Playing Field, Inc board member, Communities United Against Hate Vice President (holding programs on Antisemitism, Islamophobia and LGBTQ issues), and Maryland Education Coalition Policy Co-chair. I am also a founder of the Coalition

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for Inclusive Schools and Communities. I've worked with students, parents, MCPS staff, teachers, fellow advocates, county leaders, state leaders, and national leaders. Throughout my advocacy I have worked with MCEA and MSEA, coordinated a Blueprint town hall, and participated in Community Schools workgroups. These relationships will be valuable as I work through the structural issues in our public school systems. I also have experience in advocating for and tracking the implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's future.

I've had experience in joining boards during an unsettled time and working towards stability and reform. I joined the MCCPTA executive committee after I chaired the ad-hoc Audit Committee which helped to bring to light the financial malfeasance by the Treasurer at that time. I also joined the Free State PTA and helped them start from scratch after National PTA disbanded the previous state-wide organization. I know how important rebuilding trust is to the integrity of systems.

I have a unique set of personal attributes that will help me be successful as a Board of Education member. I have a strong sense of values which will guide me through difficult times and I don't deter easily. MCPS must provide an equitable, excellent education in safe, healthy, environments. That is the lens in which I will view my job. I am NOT the expert on how to achieve that, but I value and seek out expert opinions. I have the ability to absorb this information and make a plan of action that is achievable and pragmatic. MCPS should be as transparent as possible so that our expert educators and community partners can evaluate and help move our system forward.

I am a consensus builder and value collaboration, willing to compromise for the better good. In many instances, considering differing viewpoints will ultimately result in stronger policy. But I am also not afraid to speak out for what is best ultimately for children, even if I am not in the majority. I try my best to learn from previous mistakes and make adjustments.

3. Non-Negotiable Issues: What are the top three issues for you that are non-negotiable, and what actions will you take to address them?

All students and staff must feel safe in our schools.

I addressed this in other answers, but we must evaluate the conditions on the ground of every school and come together as a community to implement policies to make our schools safer. We need resources to change a school culture, bringing in outside experts, including experts that work against religious and cultural bigotry. Other tools are more security, mental health services, out of school time activities, more security cameras, the school ID program, vape detectors, effective resourced restorative justice, and special programs for children that need extra support so that they don't get moved from school to school.

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MCPS must provide opportunities so that all students receive an education that prepares them for success after graduation.

We need to expand Pre-K, and early intervention programs in reading and math. I would like to expand the enhanced learning programs so more children can be accommodated. More special programs like pre-IB should be brought to middle schools and high school programs should be increased so that all regions have the special programs that students want to pursue. I will suggest multilingual and special education Student and Family Navigators to help parents get through the bureaucracy.

We must clearly communicate to students and parents and this includes providing open data and transparency. See my later comments as well.

4. Parental Opt-Out and First Amendment: Do you support allowing parents to opt-out of classroom materials based on sincerely-held religious beliefs, even if these beliefs are unpopular?

I support a common inclusive curriculum for all students and do not support opting out beyond what is required by state law. A truly inclusive curriculum should include depictions of our diverse community and cultures, including religion, nationality, gender, LGBTQ, and race. Our children will be exposed to many cultures and I believe that exposure through curriculum will promote greater understanding.

5. Parental Input and Effective Communication: How do you prioritize parent input and feedback in shaping district policies, and what strategies will you implement to enhance communication between MCPS and parents?

Parental and student feedback is extremely important in developing policies. There should be direct outreach to parents when reviewing policies, including text and other messaging services like Whatsapp. I would ask to increase public comments to 3 minutes, like the County Council implemented a few years ago. If there is a topic which caused many more requests for comment than slots, I would suggest a dedicated evening to hear concerns. If I am elected, I will bring back in person BOE town halls, in the communities we serve. I will also continue to advocate for Open Data and more transparent access to documents on boardocs and the MCPS website. I believe there should be a mechanism to track board votes, like the Maryland General Assembly provides for bills. As an advocate, I believe in participatory government and this includes our students, so they should have an excused absence for a day of civic participation.

6. Recognition of Islamic Holidays: Would you support closing schools on major Islamic holidays like Eid al-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha to accommodate Muslim students and staff for religious observances?

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I support a calendar that closes schools for students on major Islamic holidays, in coordination with religious leaders. We can look at opportunities to schedule days off in a way that makes sense for our academic calendar. All major religious holidays should be treated similarly, regardless of the religion.

7. Academic Achievement and Return on Investment: What actions will you take to restore MCPS to its previous high academic achievement and ranking, while maximizing taxpayer return on investment?

First, we need to evaluate intervention programs to see how they are performing. Study success stories and list actions that were put into place in order to implement at schools that have similar characteristics. We must triage to intervene to ensure students are reading proficiently by 3rd grade by continuing to train teachers and use the science of reading. We need a similar effort to teach proven methods to develop early math and numeracy skills.

Evaluate professional development and survey teachers to find the most effective PD opportunities. Look at other districts that were able to turn around student performance and evaluate their curriculum and training methods.

Teachers need to focus on teaching and not the increasing challenges in student's behavior. Schools can help children get the support they need in order to be successful in the classroom. The community school model should be implemented fully, using community nonprofits to help families partner with schools in order to help reach the child's potential, providing out of school time programs and wrap-around services to treat a child's health needs. Individual programs should be evaluated in order to elevate the most effective strategies.

All central office positions, including temporary part time assignments, should be evaluated to ensure they are focused on the mission of providing a world class education to Montgomery County students. Are all positions well defined? Are there redundant job descriptions? We should attempt to shift money to the school level in order to improve the teacher to pupil ratio.

8. Political Neutrality and Free Speech: How would you ensure that MCPS remains neutral on political issues and upholds free speech rights, particularly concerning the recent rise in anti-Palestinian sentiments and the slanderous labeling of political speech as anti-Semitic?

The guiding principle for MCPS must be that all staff and students feel safe in school, no matter their religion, nationality, gender, sexuality, or race. Current global politics should not be something school administrators should weigh in on, but acknowledging loss of life and suffering of student's family members is appropriate. Administrators can show empathy without weighing in on global politics and policy. Free speech rights are extremely important, but as public employees with special relationships as children's teachers and mentors, all staff must be

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educated about tropes and how their social media activity can affect a child's feeling of security in the classroom. Special training by different groups specializing in teaching tolerance should be required. There should also be spaces for dialogue between student groups in order to promote mutual understanding, using neutral mediators to facilitate. Students should be able to express their concerns without maligning another group or fear of retribution.