

# 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](mailto:president@mcmcmd.org). Responses may be made public.

Candidate Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Lynne Harris \_\_\_\_\_

Submitted By: \_\_\_\_\_ Lynne Harris \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ April 19, 2024 \_\_\_\_\_

**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?

As with all forms of hate/bias, the Board must hold MCPS accountable to the promise of developing and delivering specific staff and student training about Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias. We must ensure those trainings are age-appropriate, and are co-created with those in our schools who experience Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias, as well as subject matter experts in the community. Trainings must be beta-tested for quality and effectiveness before going “live”, and incorporate feedback mechanisms to facilitate continuous improvement. We must also better publicize the student-created Stronger Student app, which provides students the power to report incidents in real time, including anonymously. All community must be empowered to report incidents with user-friendly, culturally responsive tools, and incidents must be tracked, effectively and efficiently investigated, and monitoring dashboards made accessible (with privacy protections).

Curricular content must be continuously reviewed in partnership with students and community partners for accuracy and true balance, and newly developed courses like Muslim Global Experiences and Ethnic Studies made more widely available in our High Schools. At bottom though, the most powerful tool we have to decrease hate and bias of all types is education. A windows and mirrors experience in which all students see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum they learn and the books they read, and also gain an understanding of those whose experience is different from their own. That’s how we empower critical thinking problem solvers who see the value in everyone, and don’t judge others for who they are.

Importantly, the first Action Step of MCPS’ anti-racist action plan, which really is an anti-hate/bias action plan, is Prevention through Education. I deeply appreciate how that work has emerged as not just education and information sharing, but also a vibrant celebration of culture and diversity.

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

15 years of consistent, substantive engagement in, and advocacy around, a vast array of issues across MCPS from the perspective of a parent, volunteer, PTA/MCCPTA leader, teacher and - for the past 3

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years -- Board of Education member. For each of the many issues on which I've deeply engaged, I've worked alongside a diverse group of students, families, staff members and community allies and advocates to truly understand the issue -- especially from the perspective of the students who live it every day - and to engage in thoughtful, constructive, pragmatic problem-solving. Chairing the BOE's Fiscal Management committee has also given me the opportunity to look at many aspects of the work of MCPS through a lens of operational excellence, and gain an even deeper understanding of the multiple ongoing pressures on our operating and capital budgets. I have a well-earned reputation of being an honest broker who does their homework on every issue, asks thoughtful substantive questions, never goes for the "gotcha" and cares far more about getting things done than taking credit. I've also built strong, collaborative relationships -- built on honesty and hard work -- with people throughout MCPS, and decisionmakers at the County and State level, that help me do my job better.

From curriculum to construction, from bullying to books , from special education to sustainability, from the Arts to achievement data -- I study the issues intensely, listen to those who experience them most directly, and look for ways to make things better. As a nurse, lawyer, public health practitioner and former teacher at Thomas Edison HS of Technology -- those skills and experiences make me a pragmatic problem solver who starts from a perspective of how to get things done, not a deficit thinker who sees only problems, and starts each conversation with excuses for why things can't change, or fingerpointing and blame.

I also see opportunity everywhere, and know that MCPS students are truly amazing. We have to fix the problems, but we also have to celebrate what's working. I don't hear many candidates acknowledge any of the good things happening in schools, or the great things our students and staff are doing. But I'm in schools all the time -- as a shadow student, as a guest-reader, to attend events. In every school I visit, I see good things happening. Engaged classrooms, creativity, hard working teachers and staff, and bright young people who are kind and generous. We can't lose sight of that in the cycle of negative news -- because rarely does anyone talk about, or report about, the good.

**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?

1. **Open data** that supports transparency and accountability -- about schools, programs, outcomes, equity. The structures of accountability that have been and are being created throughout MCPS must be public facing, not strictly internal. And the public facing Dashboards must be truly accessible through an array of frequently used communication platforms, and user-friendly. Sharing information openly is key to ensuring we are serving students well and making smart fiscal decisions in a difficult financial landscape.

2. **Diverse, inclusive and affirming schools and classrooms** - to truly support students, everyone in our buildings must feel safe, welcome and valued. Whatever your purpose in the building, whatever language you speak, whatever zip code you live in -- school should be a place where you feel that you belong. That includes providing students with learning that is engaging, rigorous and inclusive, and ensuring they see themselves not only in the content, but also in the people who work with them in their schools.

3. **Professionalizing the work of our Department of Compliance and Investigations** - as the IG reported, MCPS's DCI had numerous issues - including leadership lacking the requisite professional expertise, inconsistent processes and procedures, erratic investigation of

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anonymous complaints, and lengthy investigation times. That office must be restructured in conformity with industry norms and professional best practices for Human Resources and compliance/investigations. The office must be competent and well-trained in compliance and investigation work, thorough, fair, efficient and well managed to restore confidence in the investigation of complaints of all types. Easy to use mechanisms for reporting incidents must be widely understood and available to everyone, and processes must be swift and predictable, and outcomes must be shared to the extent permitted by law.

**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?

No - as above, to create schools where students feel accepted and valued requires windows and mirrors – an educational experience in which all students see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum they learn and the books they read, and also gain an understanding of those whose experience is different from their own. That's how we empower critical thinking problem solvers who see the value in everyone, and don't judge others for who they are. I would never want a student to be shunned or feel judged or targeted by fellow students walking out of the classroom when the content of the curriculum reflects their history, or because the characters in a story resemble them, their family or their community.

**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?

Parents need to be empowered to work directly with their schools and advocate for the needs of their students, and welcomed and encouraged to be part of the school community in whatever way works best for them. We've long known that parent engagement is one of the keys to student achievement. Montgomery County is full of smart people of all ages, and I always find thoughtful, constructive public input on policy and practice very informative. Some of the best ideas I've heard about how MCPS can improve come from our school system's customers - students and families - and the boots on the ground that make things work – the staff.

MCPS must continue the work to better communicate using practices/methods that are truly useful to and convenient for our community. MCPS must also provide people the information they need timely - both as a matter of routine, and also in more urgent situations. That requires regularly getting information to schools, so that they can share that information using the communication tools and methods their community uses and in the languages they prefer, and also having dependable and effective communication plans when urgent information must be shared.

**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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Yes – we need to take a comprehensive look at the school calendar and be creative in how we construct the academic year so we meet state requirements, and are equitable when it comes to identifying days for school closure. I'm also in favor of eliminating Maryland law that directs schools to close on certain non-holidays – like the Monday after Easter - to give school systems more flexibility when it comes to identifying non-school days, so that holidays important to our communities can be honored.

**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?

The Board's theory of action consists of three key components to ensure everything MCPS does is directly connected to our Strategic Plan – differentiating resources, building staff capacity, and creating structures of accountability for all areas of work.

The Board must ensure that MCPS is truly differentiating resources to meet the unique needs of our students, and is regularly talking with families about their students' learning strengths and challenges. Particularly our Emergent Multi-lingual learners and our students with Special Needs require specific, tailored supports provided by staff with the training and credentials to provide them. Student progress monitoring must be ongoing, but minimally intrusive so that assessment doesn't interrupt instruction.

The Board must also monitor the ongoing work to provide our staff with high quality, relevant professional development to enhance their capacity to provide excellent first instruction, and to serve the wide array of needs present in every classroom. We must also ensure we are providing well-crafted anti-bias training, and training designed to provide staff the skills to address the unique behavioral challenges presented by students in 2024.

Finally, to ensure that every dollar spent is directly supporting the Strategic Plan, we must ensure there are specific structures of accountability, providing mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation, for every area of work. From student outcomes to construction progress, from technology upgrades to environmental health monitoring, from mental wellness supports to the investigation of complaints, from energy performance/sustainability to financial controls, from procurement and contracting processes to transportation. Every area of work is important, and being as efficient as we can be is a hallmark of operational excellence. MCPS must transparently share our ongoing accountability monitoring so those who fund our schools can see where the money is going, and how well we are doing.

**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?

MCPS policy protects the free speech rights of our students and staff, while also creating guardrails which prevent hate speech in schools and at school-sponsored activities. It is important that our students be empowered to express their views. However – that policy must be evenly and consistently applied in a

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content neutral way, and there has been pressure on MCPS to apply a specific point of view in assessing whether student speech crosses the line between free speech and hate speech.

MCPS can't take sides, and must be very careful to closely support principals when people target the exercise of free speech rights by students - to ensure that only hate speech is curtailed, and no one specific viewpoint determines what that is. Guidance from our trusted community partners should be used to help school system leaders make those decisions when needed.