

**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: Rita Montoya, Candidate, At-Large

Submitted By: Rita Montoya
Date: 4/17/24

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?

Muslim students and families deserve to be safe in schools and free from hate bias. While HB 1386, which passed both houses and is expected to be signed by the Governor, requires anti-hate bias training for staff every other year, I believe MCPS must go even further. MCPS must front-load anti-hate bias education for students and staff every year. I think this education should also be required of Board of Education Members and PTA leaders and available to parents/caregivers as well. Moreover, MCPS must treat incidents of anti-Muslim hate and other forms of hate bias with the seriousness they deserve and ensure that victims are provided not only with support services but assurances that schools are taking steps to make sure it does not happen again.

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

As a former public defender and a mom, I believe that our kids need both connection AND consequences. Neither restorative justice nor school resource officers nor any one thing will solve the school safety problem. School-based restorative practices are necessary but so are clear boundaries and consistent consequences. Additionally, while I do not support opting out of inclusive curricula, I do believe that all parents deserve an opportunity to give their input and have their voice heard. If I'm elected, I will treat all people with respect and not disparage them, their children or their religious beliefs. We can disagree with others without weaponizing stereotypes. My lived experience also differentiates me from other candidates. I am an Indigenous Latina mom of two elementary school kids, a PTA President, and a former Juvenile Public Defender. My own educational journey started with Head Start preschool, included community college and transferring to a 4 year university before graduating from law school. I know what it's like

to push through barriers and societal externalities to achieve my educational goals.

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?

If elected, I will work hard to 1) ensure students and staff are free from physical harm as well as hate bias. Kids need both connection and consequences. I will work with my colleagues to engage with the community to determine the appropriate balance of restorative justice and police officer engagement in schools. I will also advocate for yearly anti hate bias education for students, staff, Board of Education Members and PTA leaders. I will 2) work with MCPS to increase academic rigor and provide students with tailored programs serving all student needs and learning styles through enhancement of programs like WIN (What I Need) which provides students with four 30-minute sessions weekly to group with similarly achieving students for tailored learning experiences. I strongly support programs like WIN because closing the achievement gap doesn't mean lowering the standards; it means providing those who don't have what they need with what they need to achieve (tutoring, homework help). I will also 3) rebuild public trust. Right now, there's a serious lack of transparency that really impacts the daily lives of MCPS families and staff. The lack of trust has negative impacts on budget allocations; the hiring and retention of administrators, educators, and support staff; and class enrollment and family engagement. This hurts students' ability to advance, achieve and succeed. If elected, I will model accountability, leadership, oversight, and transparency to rebuild trust in MCPS by students, families, educators, staff, administrators, community members and elected officials. I will work to establish open lines of communication to ensure a collaborative approach to improving MCPS and the culturally competent, clear, and timely release of information to students, families and staff.

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 believe that parents and caregivers should be provided an opportunity to give their input and be meaningfully and respectfully heard. However, I feel that precluding access to information can do more harm than allowing it. Kids will find ways to access information and if they do it on their own, it may be MIS-information. Kids without information can get themselves into situations they don't know how to handle or be offensive to others (for example, towards another student with two same-sex parents which I also know of happening this school year) or have negative and harmful feelings about themselves because they believe who they are is not ok. Kids also deserve to see themselves and their families in the curricula. Recently, a bill passed in both the Maryland House and Senate (Freedom to Read Act) that addresses this. It is expected that the Governor will sign it. Board of Education Members will be unable to change the policy once the Freedom to Read Act is signed into law.

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?

I believe that parents/caregivers should be provided an opportunity to give their input and be meaningfully and respectfully heard when it comes to shaping district policies. The Board of Education must also follow the laws and regulations governing public education. Where parent/caregiver input differs from the law, the Board has no choice but to follow the law. To ensure effective engagement with MCPS parents/caregivers, I plan to hold weekly virtual "Office Hours" so that I can meet and communicate with the community as well as listen to their concerns. I also plan to work with my colleagues to ensure that information from MCPS is culturally competent, clear, and timely released. I will also engage with parents/caregivers honestly even if it means hard conversations. Transparency builds trust and I will work hard to rebuild trust in MCPS.

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?

Yes. As a MCPS parent, I noticed that school closure days seem to align with various secular and religious holidays while understanding there is also a legitimate reason for school closure (i.e. end of quarter grading day, staff professional development, etc.). I think that initiating a conversation with the Muslim community about the proposed dates of closure; how they align with MCPS policies and calendar; and implementing calendar changes that can be reasonably taken (similar to other closures) is in alignment with equity. Under the current calendar, Muslim students and staff (as well as those of other religions) should be able to take necessary reasonable leave without penalty (i.e. unexcused absence or loss of pay) to observe major religious holidays.

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?

MCPS faces enormous challenges: expanding universal pre-k, maintaining inclusive curricula; closing achievement gaps; securing building repairs and the need for safe and hate-free schools. All of these impact a student's ability to learn. If elected, I will work hard to provide students with tailored programs serving all student needs and learning styles MCPS must meet the needs of those students in need of support as well as those in need of enrichment. For example, school initiatives like WIN (What I Need) group similarly situated students together for 30 min., 4 times a week with a different teacher to work on concepts in which they need support or receive enrichment in subjects where they excel. Early results look promising. In this moment, we need strong decisive leadership. I will be that leader who fights for our students and the education they deserve.

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

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recent rise in anti-Palestinian sentiments and the slanderous labeling of political speech as anti-Semitic?

MCPS needs a clear, unambiguous policy about what students and staff can and cannot do regarding speech. MCPS must hold all students to the same rules. Consistent application of MCPS policies to all students and student groups will facilitate neutrality on the part of MCPS.