



MCEA Questionnaire MCPS BoE Candidates 2024 Primary Election

Laura M. Stewart, District 4

1. Why are you running for this position? What personal attributes, characteristics, and experiences make you the right candidate for this position?

I am running for the Board of Education because I feel now is the time for me to serve. This is a very precarious time in our county. I want to bring my vast experience with accountability and transparency advocacy to the board and MCPS and ensure that we continue the work of educating and supporting kids. I also want to bring my years of experience fighting for equity in resources and opportunities to attack the achievement and opportunity gap, and focus on what educators and school administrators need most to deliver the best education for our children.

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, Women's Democratic Club President, Communities United Against Hate Vice President, Maryland Education Coalition Policy Co-chair, and District 18 Democratic Precinct Chair. I also am a founder of the Coalition for Inclusive Schools and Communities and started as a petition, gathering over 3,000 signatures. 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, participated in advocacy alongside Chris Lloyd and Jennifer Martin, participated in Community Schools workgroups and walked in the Red for Ed march with MCEA in Annapolis. 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. One important experience I have had is as a mom whose two boys have graduated from MCPS. They benefited from excellent teachers, probably some of the best in the country, and excellent programs in the arts and STEM. I'm so grateful for my children's experience, and I now want to do what I can to give back to our educators and schools who did their best for our kids.

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, including teachers who have invaluable knowledge. 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



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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.

2. Please share an overview of your campaign, including your key endorsements, fundraising, campaign plan, and why you believe you will be a competitive candidate.

I am still building capacity to run a full county campaign, but I do have a solid start. My kickoff was a success this last weekend and I will use that to build the campaign structure. Marc Elrich officially endorsed me there. Jared Solomon was also there in support of my candidacy. Others have expressed interest including council members and I expect to announce others soon. I have raised \$11,000 since I announced my candidacy on February 1st and have multiple avenues for fundraising, including supporters that bring in influencers. I also have a long history in the local Democratic Party. Because I have made connections throughout Maryland, I have potential donors from both inside and outside of Montgomery County. I plan on using networks that I have made throughout my advocacy history, including environmentalists, the LGBTQ+ space, parent groups and equity advocates. I also have partners in local political offices, and plan to use their networks as well, including any national connections. I will include regular phone time to solicit donations. The Board of Education is typically a low-dollar campaign, but my fundraising goal for the entire campaign will be 75,000 dollars which would match the largest raised in a Montgomery County Board of Education race.

My campaign plan is partially based on experience from helping to run a past successful Board of Education campaign. I plan on including youth and their voice in the campaign, and plan to have a vibrant youth field team. I also am kicking off a Teacher Round Table to help advise me on what is needed in the classroom. Brian Kramer, a new teacher, has agreed to chair the roundtable, and we are planning the first meeting. I have some experience in VAN, but do plan on recruiting a campaign manager to help pull together a solid county-wide plan, including targeted door-knocking. A county-wide targeted flier will be costly, but it will be part of the strategy to increase name recognition. Online advertising will be part of that strategy as well. I will have an active team at early voting centers and we will be attending farmer's markets as they open in the spring. I will vie for other organization endorsements as well. In my experience the Board of Education race is very much run by word of mouth. I have countywide connections through my PTA work, and will work to connect with parent influencers along with the older network I have through my work with Democratic clubs. Besides these networks, I've worked with other unions as well, like SEIU and MCAP. I will primarily run on accountability and transparency but also as a progressive candidate. My candidacy will not be negative against the incumbent, in fact I plan on running on hope and optimism for the future. A right wing candidate has entered the race and I have already received some support, including financial contributions, to defeat her. We have a chance to be a better system for students and teachers, which go hand in hand. This will be a winning strategy.

3. How can MCPS better meet the needs of students who are pursuing a career pathway approach and would benefit from an expanded Career and Technology Education (CTE) in the county? Please provide specific details.

Starting early is key. We need to ensure that graduation requirements are met as early as possible so that



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there is room in a student's schedule to complete a CTE program. There also may be prerequisite classes, so it is important to start marketing CTE and other special programs in elementary schools before children start middle school. We need to invest in CTE, and this is part of the Blueprint. It is very important that Career and College Readiness standards do not act as a CTE gatekeeper. I testified in Baltimore at MSDE on this topic. We also need to look at the placement of programs and ensure all students have a viable option that matches their interests. Covering fees associated with certificates is important. To be truly college and career ready, including being ready for CTE programs, we must continue to improve literacy in elementary school. More apprenticeship opportunities will also open more career options. We should also review transportation options for students. We must partner with trade unions, who want to do all they can to nurture the next generation of trades people.

4. What is your stance on the amount of standardized testing in MCPS for measuring student achievement? To what extent do you believe MCPS is complying with current testing laws and regulations?

We need to minimize standardized testing in the classroom so that we maximize teaching and learning. Testing is an important tool, but it should be used strategically. I do not know if MCPS is complying with current testing law and regulations, but I would ask for data from MCPS to determine if the law is being followed. Testing can assist teachers to see where they need to target instruction for some children, but only if the results are timely. Testing is not helpful if it is not useful to guide support or instruction. It should be used to determine if a child should be receiving more challenging material or if there are opportunities for review. Tests are only one data point, so one score on one day should not determine the trajectory of any student.

5. Do you support employee Paid Family Leave policies for professional, supporting services, and administrative staff? Please explain your position.

Yes, I support Paid Family Leave policies for all employees. This should be the case for all workers in our society. Employees have basic needs and it includes needing to be home with family and loved ones in certain circumstances, like welcoming a new child into the home, taking care of a family member who is very ill or while recovering from a serious illness.

6. How would you address critical concerns with staff recruitment and retention?

MCPS has lost too many staff members to other counties and does not look as attractive to new teachers or administrators as it has in the past. We must first get past the current crisis so that we can put the focus on MCPS as an attractive place to work and grow. We should prioritize "grow your own" programs for current employees and students. Paid internships and financial incentives are important tools to grow the program. We must remain competitive in the labor market as well, so the Board of Education should spend money wisely and focus on staff pay and benefits.



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7. State your view of the contract negotiation process between the Board of Education and MCEA. What do you see as your role in that process?

I believe the Board of Education should be involved along with the MCPS negotiation lead. The Board of Education should help set the priorities for the budget with the stated priorities of MCEA in mind, and try to find where they align. Bargaining should be done in good faith and lines of communication should remain open. I have a lot to learn about the bargaining process, but will be eager to be involved, especially because our family has benefited from collective bargaining. My husband works for the International Association of Fire Fighters and has been a member of his OPEIU bargaining team for many years.

8. Are you aware of the issues concerning the increasing time and workload demands on educators? What ideas do you have to address this issue? Please provide details.

I am aware of the increasing demands on teachers. I hear that more time is given to classroom management today than before the Covid-19 related school closures. Many more children have mental health challenges. Offering more wrap-around services to kids and increasing access to tele-health in schools could help children cope with challenges in school. I would like to see social workers be used as effectively as possible, possibly offering help in particularly challenging classrooms.

There are also increased testing and evaluation demands. As I have detailed elsewhere, testing has its place, but it is out of balance. I would like to learn more from experts how we can create educational safety nets for children without constant testing. I've witnessed a shortage of teachers, and have witnessed staff have to step in and help especially if the long term sub is not actually qualified in that particular subject. The lack of substitute teachers has also at times affected workload. We should work to recruit more qualified substitutes especially in math. Recruiting from local Universities might help fill in the gap.

See below on lowering class size to reduce teacher burden.

9. What do you view as MCEA priorities? How will you work with MCEA to achieve those priorities?

MCEA has several priorities. They want to close the wage gap for teachers and be treated as professionals. They want to increase support services for students so that teachers don't feel so overwhelmed by children who have needs that go beyond the classroom. Teachers also deserve a safe work environment. I plan on working with the County Council and state officials in order to build support for fully funding MCPS budgets and will also encourage MCPS to open up the books and data so that we invest in the most effective initiatives.

I will work to make a policy that ensures fidelity when implementing community schools, which will improve student support. The four pillars must all be implemented for the best outcomes, Safe work environments are essential to any workplace, especially schools because that environment includes the children's environment. I have worked with teachers to help highlight and fix physical environment issues, and will continue to work with facilities to encourage proactive measures. Workplace harassment policies must be strengthened as detailed in the last OIG report.



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10. Why do you think that the County Council didn't fully fund the budget for MCPS last year? What makes you the ideal candidate to facilitate and build relationships that prioritize fully funding the budget?

The County Council did not want to raise the property tax enough to cover the proposed MCPS budget along with fulfilling contracts at other agencies. Unfortunately, the property tax is our only tool. I believe that we need more progressive tax tools, which the state can authorize, like a progressive income tax. I would like to see a roundtable of economists to meet and offer taxing solutions for both the operating and capital budgets.

I have experience in advocating for progressive taxes and have built good working relationships at the County Council and state level. I will do my best to work with legislators to show that we will pay more by letting our crown jewel, MCPS, deteriorate to the point that it becomes a liability. We MUST invest in educating our children which will attract businesses and a tax base to the area.

I was a lead advocate for the recent progressive recordation tax, which saved many projects from being delayed in the last CIP. I built relationships with county council candidates that later became council members, as well as veteran members. I believe that the Board of Education should have been more active in advocating for the progressive recordation tax.

Lastly, MCPS opacity contributed to the council being more conservative in funding than desired. County Council would like to see more line item spending and I would support that movement.

11. What will you do to ensure the Board of Education does not delegate its decision-making authority to the superintendent and their staff?

The Board of Education does not fully use its authority and hasn't done so in many years. I plan on working to shift the culture by being a more active board member and offering resolutions when needed, which is a tool to help direct the school system. I also will strive to be on the Policy Management Committee, where the Board of Education can directly affect policies which the superintendent must follow. The Board should also ask for more funding for staff. The new financial analyst position is a step in the right direction. I also want to explore the idea of dedicated legal counsel that reports directly to the Board of Education. This could save money in the end by creating more checks and balances and avoiding legal pitfalls.

12. Do you believe that the Board of Education has delegated their decision-making authority to the Superintendent and their staff? Please explain.

The Board of Education seems to go by the philosophy that they have a main job, and that is to hire the superintendent. I agree that is an extremely important part of the job, but it is only the beginning. Oversight is just as or even more important. If a policy is not being followed with fidelity, resolutions may be made in order to uphold the policy intended. The Board of Education should always try to work WITH the superintendent and staff in order to achieve the goals they set forth, but the Board of Education is ultimately the governing body.

13. How do your views support protections for diversity and equity in hiring, curriculum, and operations?



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I fully support diversity and equity initiatives in hiring, curriculum, and operations. We live in one of the most diverse counties in the country and our school system should reflect that. In hiring, the Grow your Own initiative is key. We have an immensely talented pool of diverse students and support staff that would make excellent teachers.

Curriculum should be inclusive to race, financial background, religion, gender and the LGBTQ+ community. Children need to see themselves and others, mirrors and windows. All staff and students should feel heard and safe in the operations of schools. We need to be sure that strong policies are in place so that all stakeholders know that if discrimination or harassment occurs, they will have an avenue to report and then appropriate action from MCPS.

14. How will you actively work to get a balanced view on the state of MCPS? What sources will you use to get your information?

I plan on meeting with all stakeholders, including students, guardians, teachers, support staff, administrators, central office, fellow board members and legislator views. I also plan on implementing teacher and student roundtables so that they can share experiences with me and hope to do the same with students. I will also ask for data from MCPS if there are gaps in information.

15. What are the three things you would like to accomplish in the next four years if elected to the Board of Education?

1. Change board culture to include more oversight to increase accountability in the system which should include implementing open data, and reviewing policies and adherence to Title IX.
2. Implement best practices to significantly shrink the achievement and opportunity gap, focusing first on third grade literacy.
3. Successfully work with County Council and state officials to find new progressive revenue sources in order to fully fund the MCPS budget.

16. As a Board member, would you support and advocate for smaller class sizes? Do you believe that the Board's class size guidelines should be required, or merely advisory? Please explain your response.

I support smaller class sizes, even though that was not a goal in the Blueprint. Teachers are clearly overwhelmed and it is a struggle to differentiate instruction in a large classroom as well. Considering the budgeting issues, the only way we will achieve smaller class sizes would be to advocate for an adjustment in revenue policy at the state level and County Council. The BOE should partner with MCEA to advocate for more progressive income and property tax. The class size guidelines should be required, but within a very small range to allow for a small amount of flexibility. The guidelines are already too high. I believe that adding a .5 FTE instead of a full FTE (an example that happened in my child's classroom years ago) to alleviate a very large classroom is not a real solution.



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17. As a member of the Board of Education, how would you balance honoring ratified contracts with other priorities, especially in tight fiscal times?

I would prioritize honoring ratified contracts. There would have to be a true financial crisis in order for contracts to be reopened, not merely “tight” fiscal times. If there was a downturn similar to the recession of 2008, there would need to be adjustments. But in a recovery, restoration should be prioritized.

18. What is your position on expanding the opt-out policy beyond that which is required by state law?

I do not support expanding opt-out and lead an effort to support MCPS’s decision to make it clear that opt-out policy should not go further than what is required by state law. In fact, I started a petition to support current MCPS policy under the new Coalition for Inclusive Schools and Communities that I helped to deliver to the current Board of Education which included over 3000 signatures from individuals and groups. MCPS was not very clear with their expectations of Principals concerning the opt-out policy when inclusive storybooks including LGBTQ+ characters were added to all elementary schools. As a Board of Education member, I would like to review the way principals are given instructions when initiatives roll out. There should be continuity in the system.

19. What will you do to protect and remove barriers for student access in an inclusive and representative curriculum at MCPS?

We need to keep the no opt-out policy and provide an inclusive and representative curriculum in all schools. We should look at classes offered in high school and ensure that diverse choices are offered. I also discussed the inclusive curriculum above. All curriculum should be reviewed to assure it truly reflects our diverse population, including race, religion, sex and gender. Principals need clear guidelines to ensure access to inclusive curriculum.

20. What are your thoughts about the MCPS practice of continually relying on outside consultants and private contracting for everyday business? How would you propose MCPS better utilize their in-system resources?

I believe that good hiring practices will help alleviate the need for outside consultants. We must hire experts in their field, which isn’t necessarily an ex-principal from MCPS. We also need to fill vacancies so that staff has enough time for the workload. Contracting for everyday business should be a rare occurrence. When we hire consultants who are not accountable as our union employees are, we compromise the delivery of our services.