



# **MCEA Questionnaire MCPS BoE Candidates 2024 Primary Election**

## **Rita Montoya, At-Large**

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

As a mom of two young kids, ages 8 & 9, MCPS' decisions affect my family's day to day life and long-term plans. I am running for the At-Large position on the Board of Education because elementary school families, families of color and families with learning differences deserve a voice on the BOE. As a MCPS parent and taxpayer, I trusted the BOE would operate properly and with accountability and was very disappointed to see otherwise. It is clear the current BOE dynamic is not working for MCPS families, educators and administrators. As a mother of color, a PTA President, a trained attorney and nonprofit leader, I bring a variety of perspectives to the Board of Education. My own educational journey—from Head Start preschool to law school via community college—is also a testament to what students can achieve when provided with the appropriate support mechanisms. Additionally, I am well-versed at working with all types of people in all types of settings. I know that collaboration can occur irrespective of varying viewpoints and approaches and have demonstrated history employing those methods. As a Public Defender and policy advocate, and even on the PTA, I experienced many situations where despite disagreement we were able to get to a place of agreement through collaboration. I also firmly believe that if a person engages with someone long enough, they can find a point of connection between them and from there collaboration can grow. Moreover, I had to work hard and push through barriers to achieve so I know firsthand what many of our students and families are experiencing. As a Public Defender and policy advocate, I also learned how to push through barrier in a productive and engaging way without getting knocked down.

### **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.**

While my campaign has only just begun, I am encouraged by the energy of the many families and MCPS employees (teachers, staff and administrators) who have verbally indicated their early support. I also have solid campaign staff in my Treasurer and web master/marketer. Most importantly, I have the love, support and encouragement of my family who are already being flexible in their schedules to accommodate my campaign and ultimately my election and service on the Board of Education. Additionally, I have positive working relationships with my local and state elected officials and many were happy to hear of my candidacy. I am also in the final stages of receiving an appointment to a state-wide Board by Governor Wes Moore and underwent Senate Confirmation this past Monday (2/12) which required notifying both the Governor and the Senate Committee, as well as my own Senator (Waldstreicher), of my candidacy. Further, last week, I testified on a Senate bill sponsored by two Montgomery County Senators—Kramer and Hester—in furtherance of protecting children's data privacy at the request of Montgomery County Delegate Jared Solomon (Maryland Kids Code) and yesterday, I testify for another bill sponsored by Senator Hester to fund and promote digital and media literacy education in primary and secondary schools aimed at preventing algorithmic addiction. While I have not secured any official endorsements at this early stage of my candidacy, I am hopeful that I will. [montoya4mcps.com](http://montoya4mcps.com)

### **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**



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**specific details.**

MCPS must survey current 7th-10th graders to discover their interests and goals and ensure CTE offerings are in alignment with students needs and wants. This data not only provides students an opportunity to invest in their own career development but provide invaluable information to MCPS so they can update their CTE offerings and establish partnerships with many of the Montgomery County organizations and businesses to create career pipelines. Doing so will ensure that MCPS graduates are prepared for the jobs actually available in the county and Montgomery County can avoid a brain drain. I believe that businesses in Montgomery County should engage more with the MCPS community through the provision of knowledge, resources and in some cases hard materials (automotive equipment for auto programs; biomedical equipment for labs; etc.).

**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?**

While data-driven decision-making is important, we also must consider whether it is an accurate measure of whether our students are achieving; the barriers for students populations to accurately test; and the time that testing takes away from learning time. Still, MCPS must keep in mind that a requisite amount of testing is required to meet federal and state requirements to ensure that MCPS avoids a negative federal accountability rating. While certain assessments are required by state law—English, Math, Science and Govt—MCPS appears to require more than is necessary. Namely, the College and Career Readiness requirement does not necessitate students taking the ACT, SAT or Accuplacer yet MCPS requires it on top of the other subject matter assessments. Though I can appreciate encouraging students to achieve academically, I think this requirement is misplaced for a variety of reasons: 1) not every student wants to attend college or needs to do so to meet their post-secondary school goals; 2) Standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT are not necessarily reflective of students competency especially populations like students of color; 3) tests like the ACT and SAT are largely testing on whether students understand the testing process, have access to resources to prepare, and can perform in one particular way; and 4) the amount of preparation for tests such as this would be in addition to the student’s usual high school requirements which takes away from the learning and social high school experience.

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

Yes. MCPS employees are employees of an employer just like any other workplace. MCPS employees also experience life events that require leave just like any other workplace. They should be treated with the same respect and decency that other workplaces afford. Our teachers and staff cannot provide the level of support our students and schools need if they and their families are not well. While I understand the administrative challenges that, for example, paid teacher can leave may pose, I do believe it is fundamental to a healthy workplace.

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



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People want to work where they are valued and employers show value by providing solid pay scales and safe, sufficiently resourced workplaces. MCPS must provide not only competitive pay but provide sufficient professional development; classroom supplies/resources and paid family leave in line with the offerings of other places of employment. Employees should not have to provide their own supplies. Employees must also feel safe in their workplace—safe from physical violence, harassment and retribution for speaking up about wrongdoings and workplace challenges. As a Board Member, I will ensure that the proper policies are not only in place but that the culture permits and applauds those employees who seek to better MCPS by bringing forth these challenges and wrongdoings so they can be addressed. I know that MCPS currently has a new staff recruitment plan which purportedly is going to use “modern” recruitment methods and I look forward to seeing the results in Fall ’24.

### **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?**

Negotiations do not have to be adversarial. As a Public Defender, negotiation was key. As a negotiator, I learned that collaboration would get us to our respective goals faster and smoother than adversarial engagements. As a Board Member, I believe my role is support smooth negotiation, facilitate a collaborative process and engage earnestly so that we can “get to yes” (Fisher & Ury) and ensure that the teachers and staff feel comfortable and confident in the process. The resulting contract is a legal document that must be respected and I know that parties can only do that when they feel they have a voice in the process.

### **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.**

Yes. Educators are increasingly being asked to provide levels of support beyond what they signed up for and that were typically reserved for parents, guardians and caregivers or were historically needed by less students than those currently in need. The COVID pandemic heightened those needs as well. While I think that, unfortunately, educators have no choice but to absorb some of the demand simply as a practical matter—students are showing up with the increased needs no matter what—MCPS has a variety of options available to help address this. First, MCPS could address this increase by reducing class sizes or providing alternative class models. For example, at one MCPS elementary school, students have W.I.N class 4 days a week for the last 20-25 minutes of the day. W.I.N stands for “What I Need.” Students are grouped based on their specific needs that particular quarter. For some students, it could be to catch up; for others, it could be to advance further. Students change groups and teachers each quarter which also allows them to learn from different teachers and engage with students who may not be in their homeroom. Recently, my own child read a book passage, then watched the same passage in a movie and then engaged in an art project based on the passage. He had fun, learned a lot and spent time with a non-homeroom teacher and other students in the school. MCPS must also do a better job engaging with parents/guardians/caregivers so that we can better show up for our children. Many do not understand or know how to help our children with the current curriculum as we were not taught these methods. Many are also dealing with their own challenges—which were also heightened during the COVID pandemic. While we cannot PEP class our way out of this, providing culturally competent spaces where parents/guardians/caregivers can engage with support services and each other can help provide a greater sense of community which can ultimately support the entire family—leading to better results in the classroom and less demand on educators. Moreover, the County must step



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up even further and provide support in the areas that are not directly associated with education but impact a student and family's ability to properly engage. MCPS cannot absorb the costs—financially and energetically—of all of the resources and support services our students and families need.

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

Empowering educators; strengthening relationships with the community; educating elected officials; empowering teacher leaders through professional development; advocacy; and unity around social justice issues. I am committed to working with MCEA and its members to ensure that educators have a true voice in MCPS operations and that the practicalities of operating and educating in MCPS are taken into account. Too often, educators are being left out of curriculum and operational decision-making then blamed for the fallout.

### **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?**

Based on my understanding—conversations and media—the lack of budget oversight seems to be concerning to county legislators. I have strong working relationships with local legislators at all levels and my current work in law and policy make me an ideal person to navigate these conversations. The call for oversight and transparency is loud and legislators need Members they can trust and rely upon.

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

As the leader of two community-based 501(c)(3) organizations—a PTA and an advocacy nonprofit—and a trained attorney, I take my oversight responsibilities very seriously because I know that I am ultimately responsible for the actions of my organizations. Accordingly, I conduct my due diligence and make no apologies for exercising proper oversight including asking questions, enacting policies and streamlining procedures when necessary. As an elected official, I plan to do the same.

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

It is important that the Board of Education maintain their decision-making authority and conduct proper due diligence when carrying out their duties. I can appreciate that the nature of the position—part-time and little to no staff—may make that difficult but it cannot be an excuse. To the extent that the Board of Education places an over reliance on the Superintendent and their staff, it is important that a course correction occur to ensure proper oversight of MCPS.

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

Equity is lens I cannot take off and my professional and personal actions are in alignment. As an Indigenous and Latina mother, who is also certified in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and with a demonstrated history of equity work, I know first-hand the value of students and employees not only seeing themselves in their



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surroundings but feeling like they actually belong. As a current PTA President and a mother of color, I know first-hand the value and comfort of engaging with educators and school administrators of color—namely, the lack of fear and the welcoming when I need to address issues of racism or culture erasure. As only the 2nd PTA President of color at my school, I was welcomed by a Principal of color and it made a huge difference. We were able to engage in open, constructive ways about various school challenges and get to solutions quickly. As a mother, I felt comfortable speaking to our Principal about my family’s challenges because there was a cultural understanding and lack of judgment which ultimately helped us get to where we needed to be. As the mother of two children who self-identify as boys, I have seen the value of male teachers. My sons are ecstatic when they have a male teacher or principal yet only 21% of MCPS teachers are male with the highest concentrations in middle and high schools. MCPS must reflect society we live in so that students are not only prepared for it but can thrive.

### **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 will continue to listen to anyone who wants to engage and continue to reach out to MCPS and community stakeholders. I am open to new ideas from all and fundamentally believe that to be truly informed, I must consider all view points—even those with which I may disagree. As a Board Member, I plan to have “office hours” to provide an explicit time for community engagement. The format will vary—in-person, virtual—based on community needs and scheduling but I believe that a consistent connection time with the community is very important to rebuild public trust and ensure I am aware of our community’s views and needs.

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

Safe Schools; Decreasing achievement gaps which inherently includes sufficient support and resources for teachers and staff; and strengthening administrative oversight and transparency.

### **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.**

As a Board Member, I would advocate for smaller class sizes, especially in Math. The COVID pandemic intensified the inequities in achievement and even children who were doing well prior to COVID are struggling in some areas. I also heard from many families that the math curriculum is unfamiliar and they often do not know how to help their children even with the teacher provided aides. Even compacted math classes are experiencing large class sizes—putting students at a disadvantage and teachers in a bind. While I think that class size guidelines should be mandatory to ensure equitable class size options across schools, I acknowledge that staffing needs and budget constraints may render that impossible right now. I do think the goals need to be set and class size decreases should start phasing into schools most in need.

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



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Ratified contracts are legally binding and enforceable. MCPS has a legal obligation to carry them out. Failure to do so could result in unnecessary legal and negotiation fees which are already a huge and rising cost for MCPS. Generally, MCPS must work harder to partner with business, organizations, parents and even MCPS schools and universities (high school and college students to volunteer in middle and elementary schools, for example) to meet other priorities as not honoring its legal obligations is not a good option.

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

I understand and appreciate that families want to have a say in the content of their children's education. I also believe providing an opportunity for people to be heard is crucial to community engagement and trust-building. MCPS must also ensure that students are prepared and knowledgeable about the realities of life and society and not only those which are in alignment with a family's beliefs. MCPS must also follow the law.

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

All students deserve to see themselves and their families in the MCPS curriculum. I will continue to push for community education on these issues; Board and MCPS policies that enshrine them; and in-school actions that carry them out.

### **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?**

MCPS must utilize in-house resources whenever possible. MCPS should not rely upon private contractors for day to day services, such as building maintenance, when MCPS employees know MCPS and its schools best and are not only in the best position to provide invaluable input but actually invest in their school environments and students. While there may be times when outsourcing professional services, such as legal, may be a necessity, MCPS must be reasonable in these expenditures. MCPS is located in a large metropolitan area with a high concentration of excellent legal service providers. MCPS consistently choosing high-priced law firms to handle legal matters resulted in expenditures for outside counsel legal fees for Fiscal Year 2024 through the month of September 2023 increasing by \$580,559 more (442.54 percent) than the same period in the previous year (See Memorandum from Monifa B. McKnight, Superintendent of Schools dated January 11, 2024.) MCPS must take stock of the in-house resources it has by connecting with employees who are in the best position to know what is needed, what can be provided in-house and what should be outsourced.