

**MCEA 2020 Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire**  
**Sunil Dasgupta candidate for the At-Large seat**

*Questions 1 – 7 personal information filled in the form and redacted.*

**8. Specify, in detail, what programs and initiatives are currently being implemented successfully by MCPS to close the achievement gap? What is still needed? What is no longer working?**

We need to double down and prioritize closing the achievement/performance gap in the next five years. We know that parts of the MCPS approach work, but some parts are failing to break through. This is a key reason I am running for a Board of Education seat. I hope to target the performance gap by finding ways to hire more teachers, staff, and counselors to make a real dent in class size and staff ratios; empowering teachers and staff with training and planning time; and helping rebuild the home and school partnership. Meeting these goals come down to money. Board members have a pulpit they can use to generate public support for more county and state funding, but they have a responsibility to make the best use of the money that is allocated. I have a plan that can help rebalance capital and operating budgets over time and allow MCPS to vastly expand hiring.

MCPS currently addresses the performance gap by adding extra resources through its Focus and Title 1 school designation at the elementary level. The school designation is used to signify need in the community and to allocate community-wide resources that allow for smaller class sizes and services such as Linkages to Learning. Second, there is targeted funding of certain student subsets such as English-language learners and special education students. In secondary schools, for example, ESOL 1 and 2 level students are often in “sheltered” classes and receive some added resources as well. Third, MCPS is expanding Pre-K as an early intervention to reduce the emergence of achievement gap. Fourth, MCPS has started universal screening for magnet selection so that students from lower income families, and Black and Brown students are not tracked to less rigorous coursework.

The record of these initiatives is mixed. Universal screening is working and I believe it is changing the composition of magnet programs especially in the ES CES. The plan to expand Pre-K is critical as well because this essential early intervention is essential to mitigate the performance gap as it is opening up.

Focus and Title 1 designations bring extra resources, but they are not always consistent and it is hard to target the students in the greatest need. Some programs like Linkages to Learning are useful in providing wraparound services, but face constant pressure. I have worked with Linkages providers and heard of moving stories of unmet need. We need to address this.

Class-size reduction is a key part of Focus/Title 1 designation. Smaller class size will allow teachers time to build relationships with individual students and their families, but we don’t always meet that goal.

Recently, I learned that some class-size reduction schools saw an increase in class size in 2017-18. I discovered this by accident when looking at data on development moratoriums and found that some schools (Glen Haven ES, Sargent Shriver ES) had come out of moratorium watch

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without any capacity expansion. We need to stop this practice. If we do not maintain low class size for Focus and Title 1 schools, we defeat the purpose of designation. Class-size reductions apply to K-2, which is where it is most needed.

It is worth noting here that MCPS targets compensatory education funds primarily at elementary schools and not to secondary schools. Not surprisingly, the efforts to address the performance gap at the secondary level are simply lagging. We have to make investments at the secondary level as well to reduce class sizes, expand tutoring programs and extracurriculars to help reduce performance gaps.

Specifically, we have to direct resources toward English-language learners. According to the December Montgomery County Council Office of Legislative Oversight report, MCPS has actually decreased per-student allocation for English-language learners between 2014 and 2018, right at the time when the population of English-language learners expanded. A key area of concern is hiring more ESOL teachers and preferably bilingual ESOL teachers.

Further, the “sheltered” ESOL classes in secondary schools provide targeted teaching resources to newly-arrived secondary school students. Any rethinking of this program needs to be well-thought out. We should not rush to remove these supports without putting in other targeted arrangements helping English-language learners become proficient. I do think having more bilingual ESOL teachers will help build relationships and help the transition.

A big part of the problem is that the performance gap is also a color gap. A 2019 MCPS-commissioned report found that black and Latino students were assigned more often to novice teachers and tracked into less rigorous coursework. We should address this by trying to increase diversity of the workforce to reflect diversity of students, which will help build relationships. Further, we need to revise curriculum to better reflect diversity and engage students of color.

We have to find ways to reduce the concentration of poverty itself that enables an opportunity gap and manifests in performance gap. Counter to common perceptions of Title I funding, Title I calculations are based on district-wide numbers, not individual school percentages. Title I does not need to be a school specific grant. We need to enact greater flexibility to better utilize our Title I funds. But we are concentrating poverty in a number of schools which places stress on the teachers, staff, and administrators. This isn’t just a burden on the teachers and staff, but a huge disservice to students and really a cause of the performance gap.

Lastly, I want to mention the home and school partnership. Of the four pillars of a successful education system—among them funding, leadership, and teachers—the home school partnership is the perhaps the most neglected. It mainly functions through the PTA, which works sometimes but not consistently. To me the home school partnership is about the permeability between schools and communities. It is about parents participating in schools and teachers being out in the community and being able to develop a direct relationship that inform each other’s work.

One suggestion I have heard is to pay teachers to make home visits during the summer. Obviously, there is a cost involved and there is the question of whether teachers should

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volunteer. While the details would need to be worked out, the concept of teachers having the time to develop relationship not only with individual students but with their families is an exciting prospect that reverses a few decades of decline in American social capital. If indeed we believe that home life determines student performance, then it is incumbent on education leaders to find ways to address home and school partnership.

**9. State and explain your position, support or opposition, to local efforts to create and support community schools in areas of concentrated poverty?**

I support the community schools model as outlined in Kirwan recommendations. The recommendations seek to bring both resources and governance to schools with the greatest need. According to the recommendations, the school system provides extra resources for these schools but also establishes a community governance board to make sure that funds are appropriately spent. In the MCPS pilot, it is not clear what a community board would look like. We need to do this.

Further, we should try to ensure that the community schools reflect the community and use resources available in the community. We need to do a better job connecting independent organizations to MCPS students to identify specific needs. I have seen this especially with my work on mental health and wellness. The county has some incredible resources, but their services are not connected. In Upcounty Montgomery, the Healthcare Initiative Foundation has driven community resources to schools such as Daly Elementary.

However, I want more clarity on designated community schools. One longer-term concern I have with designated community schools is whether these schools will be permanently designated community schools and remain permanent concentrations of poverty. I would like to see some thinking about sunseting the community school designation whether through boundary change, economic development, or other methods. We must step back and think about what we intend with this designation and establish clear goals for these schools. The leadership and staff need to understand where they are going.

**10. What are your views on the right balance between gifted and talented, magnet, or signature programs and the provision of rigorous instruction for all students?**

I have had direct experience on this issue based on my own children's experience and as a result my own thinking has evolved over time. When my children started in MCPS, I thought they would qualify for select magnet programs. They did not. I sought to understand why and the discovery process helped change my thinking.

One caveat. My comments here address selective or island magnet programs, not whole school lottery magnets which are different from the GT model.

My children's entry into MCPS coincided with the policy shift to universal screening and keeping home-school cohorts. If not for these policies, at least one of my children would be in a magnet program. (I have a child who goes to a lottery magnet.) So, these new policies were

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personally detrimental to us as a family, but came to agree with them regardless and here is what I found:

The balance between GT and general academic programs depends on how we define GT. The law provides a definition for what is GT, but the law itself is a social artifact and tries to combine two quite different concepts:

A) A definition of GT that is broad and includes those children who can be prepared to be GT. In this model, family resources are often critical in determining which children will go into the magnet programs. And as more families prepare their children for magnet programs, the school system will have to build more and larger magnet programs to accommodate them.

B) A narrow definition of gifted, which identifies the uniquely gifted rather than just the better prepared. This model leads to more limited magnet programs, but expanded and enriched curriculum in the home school. There is some level of difficulty in determining the uniquely-gifted from the well-prepared, but organizations such as Johns Hopkins CTY seem to be able to do this.

My research led me to change my mind and I now prefer Model B over Model A. As a BOE member I would move in this direction. We cannot keep building larger and larger magnet programs and separating them from the rest of our schools. These programs require significant resource commitments and those resources have to come from somewhere.

MCPS has a policy of meeting every student where they are. This can be done at the home schools students are assigned to. It is only the uniquely gifted whose needs are difficult to meet in with home school programming and it might be necessary to expand our collaborations with specialist organizations to incorporate best practices in selection and course offerings.

Meanwhile to meet the needs of other students, we should make more content education available. So, for example, in middle school, we have added Global Humanities and Applied Investigations in Math. We should consider more content courses especially in science, including in brain science and brain development. We should also try to get our middle schoolers coding in middle school. The current coding courses are too rudimentary to make students learn actual coding.

As we do this, we need to keep in mind that students of color have equal opportunity to track up toward the more rigorous coursework whether they be in a magnet program or in the home school. One way to ensure this is to diversify our recruitment to include more teachers and staff of color.

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**11. How can MCPS better meet the needs of students who are pursuing a career pathway approach and would benefit from an expanded CTE education in the county? Provide specifics you would like to happen?**

Currently, MCPS supports career education in special schools (Edison) and in-home schools. I believe reducing teacher and staff ratios in secondary schools could allow more specialist coursework that could be run with less than 20 students right in home schools.

Like magnet programs, there are two models for building our more career pathways: separately in schools like Edison; and mainstream in home schools. Philosophically, I lean toward adding more programming to the home school, but recognize that capital-intensive programming such as construction would have to be limited to specific locations.

Specifically, there is a pilot program for high school internships that should be expanded. We need to make sure that every school has an effective internship coordinator and the internship coordinator has the resources to develop relationships with local businesses, nonprofits, and community groups, and to help students connect coursework with workforce needs.

Coding is a good example. Most students can do it. It is not really math-heavy. But coding lessons are very rudimentary lessons and need to be strengthened. Coding has a language of its own so English-language learners can learn at a pace close to English-proficient students. But we have to begin early in middle school. The challenge we face is finding coding teachers in large enough numbers.

We talk about a lot about engineering and STEM in this context, but MCPS also has had consistent success in its high school early child development programs. Given the teacher shortage, I would like to see this expansion of coursework preparing students for teacher training (though we need also to burnish the reputation of teaching as a profession) and perhaps a partnership with a university or more to send MCPS graduates there for undergraduate work combined with teacher training and a promise of being hired back by the system.

A second area that requires relatively fewer resources is developing career pathways in the media and journalism. Not only should every high school have a school newspaper/YouTube channel/podcast but there should be paid faculty support for one or even two advisors. Having strong school-based media outlets will help feed the media market in Washington, DC with local talent but also offer alternative ways to look at school quality away from published rankings.

To make a meaningful systemwide shift toward career education, we need a culture shift and parent education to enable that culture shift. In Montgomery County, we have a general preference for college over career paths, some of it associated with prestige and others with the economic advantages that accrue from college degrees. This is a legacy of an era where upward mobility was narrowly defined. In today's economy, plumbers, mechanics, electricians, medical technicians, and software programmers often make more money than college-necessary jobs especially in the first 10 years or so of a career. Moreover, a plumbing job can be a way to pay

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for the ever-increasing costs of college. If we strengthened the home and school partnership, we could leverage that to begin to move attitudes.

**12. Do you support an employee Paid Family Leave policies like those provided by DCPS for their professional, supporting services, and administrative staffs? Please explain your position.**

Yes, I absolutely support paid family leave for all school system employees. Eight weeks of family leave for events, such as birth, adoption, and caring for an immediate family member including parent, is consistent with where other jurisdictions are and where the economy is generally headed. A more robust paid family leave policy would not only improve teacher and staff retention, but also boost staff morale and make MCPS more competitive. It isn't just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do.

Paid family leave is particularly important for women, who constitute the majority of the teachers and staff in MCPS, and we have to ensure that they are not subject to national wage gaps. A strong paid family leave policy can ease the hard choices employees often have to make choices between career advancement and family responsibilities.

**13. There is considerable room for improvement in addressing educator recruitment and retention. Across the state, educator salaries have been relatively flat for the last eight years. Pension benefits have reduced, while employee contributions have increased. Class sizes have increased because of cost-cutting measures due to hiring freezes, lay offs, and retirements. Additionally, there has been the elimination of support personnel positions. How will you address critical concerns with educator recruitment and retention?**

There are three challenges here: a) how to find the money to hire and pay teachers more, b) how to address the national shortage of new teachers, and c) how to enhance teacher training.

- a) Hopefully, we have money coming from the state as it funds the Kirwan Commission, but in the short term there is money that can be released by rebalancing the capital and operating budget. I believe the process if done well can release money for hiring hundreds of new teachers. This will come from reducing debt obligations, savings on portables, and altering school construction design to secure a higher level of state reimbursement. Normally, capital and operating budgets are seen as separate channels, but why? BOE can and should negotiate with the County Executive and County Council to rebalance between capital and operating budgets, but we need an effective process for school boundary change *that is politically acceptable*. In a previously published op-ed, I argued for that focusing on developing a process that provides autonomy, predictability, and stability in making boundary change.

<https://www.marylandmatters.org/2019/12/17/opinion-focus-on-process-to-get-school-redistricting-right/>

I would like to note here that rebalancing in the manner I have suggested will lead to changes over years and not within in one or two or even four years of BOE member's

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term. If we focus on building a fair and transparent process to review and adjust utilization, we will save money over time and savings will build up. We will not need to make a 30-year overhaul as we are currently engaged.

I fully understand as well that new facilities must be built to accommodate growth in student enrollment. That's pretty unavoidable in my view. But we should use the capacity we currently have, make sure to maintain what we have, and only then take on new projects. We should get a bigger bang for the buck by adjusting school design to seek greater state reimbursement for new construction.

- b) There is a teacher shortage nationally and in Montgomery County. There are fewer teacher training colleges and new teachers are leaving within years of starting in the profession. Hiring and keeping teachers requires more resources, but also requires we elevate the profession, improve work conditions, support teacher autonomy, and build in extra time for teachers to develop relationships with individual students and families.
- c) When the standards movement first emerged in the 1980s, the goal was for greater consistency in teaching across districts, schools, and classrooms. Now, three decades of emphasizing standards have reduced teacher autonomy and eroded the relationships that were and should be the foundation of teaching and learning. While standards are mostly set by state and federal agencies, we must find ways to restore the balance between standards and other activities that contribute to successful teaching, including teacher autonomy, relationship building, and career advancement that allows classroom teachers to remain in the classroom and not have to take on administrative responsibilities for the sake of promotions.
- d) Teacher and staff training time is scarce and can be expensive. Hiring more teachers and staff will help, but all teachers and staff - especially those who are new to the profession - need effective training and professional development. Too often professional development is seen as just a requirement instead of a source of excitement and even a path to advancement. In order for teachers to be effective, teachers need more time to work on lesson planning, engage in content learning, acquire new skills, examine best practices from other systems, and pursue special coursework such as on Mental Health First Aid.

To reinvigorate training, we must involve teachers in developing and managing professional development. One possibility might be to look at longer contracts for new teachers to include more training time. Another would be to allow more planning and training time during the year in addition to offering professional development opportunities, like graduate course credits. And with increased hiring that adds planning time, a third possibility could be to encourage more group-based professional development through which handfults of teachers gather to develop their own learning programs.

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**14. The Maryland Legislature will be working on The Blueprint For Maryland's future legislation to address the underfunding of our schools. Please provide your general and specific thoughts on how the county can address the unmet needs facing our schools. Detail how you would prioritize aid for education in your budget deliberations.**

I support fully funding the Kirwan recommendations. There needs to be a public movement to back leaders who will ensure that these measures will be veto-proof. This effort needs all of us to work together: teachers, principals, administrators, BOE members, families, and students. One way to turn out families is to give students leadership and speaking roles in presenting the case for fully funding Kirwan. I want to emphasize that this is not astroturfing, but a real collaboration with meaningful leadership roles. Student leaders have asked MCPS to allow three excused days off for civic engagement and this is the reason to allow it. I would further recommend tying civic engagement to classroom work. I am doing this personally in my own classes.

I think students are the spearhead for turning out families and I would support the demand of students for out of school civic engagement to be treated as excused absences.

As a BOE member, we ask for money, we don't raise it. But here are some ideas.

- A property tax increase is the most obvious way to increase school funds, but we have to keep in mind that any effort to raise property taxes in the county is likely to see a legal challenge. Montgomery County is subject to property tax cap, but it is also believed that the cap does not include education. No jurisdiction in the state has attempted to test this, but we should try to build a public movement and test the case if there were a legal challenge.
- We need to look at school design to increase state reimbursement for new construction.
- We can also raise money by rebalancing the capital and operating budgets. In particular, we should consider how we can reduce our need for capital spending by reassigning students to under-capacity schools. This will bring down bonding and debt-service payments. For every \$100 million saved in capital spending, we save \$8 million in debt service, or the salaries of 100 teachers. Further, we will see savings on portable rentals. The overall savings could fund a big hiring expansion.
- Releasing money from capital budgets in favor operating spending will require the BOE to negotiate directly with County executive, County Council, and even the State, which in turn will require a new kind of leadership at BOE.

**15. What is your view of MCEA's role in education reform within MCPS?**

I am firmly of the belief that teachers are central to producing the best learning outcomes for our students. As a university faculty member, I come from a shared governance perspective. University faculty in Maryland public universities are exempt employees and not part of any collective bargaining by law. We act collectively through shared governance enshrined in the Faculty Senate. We hire our colleagues, we promote our colleagues, and we determine together what we will teach, and how to teach them. We determine rewards and we determine adverse action when that becomes necessary. So, philosophically, this is my disposition.



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As the union of teachers, MCEA is a key stakeholder in MCPS. In that role, MCEA brings to the table reform initiatives teachers see as critical to their success and, importantly to me, it brings capabilities such as outreach and organization. MCPS and BOE best serve students when they are able to work collaboratively with the union. When this partnership becomes untenable, the outcomes are almost always suboptimal and potentially hurt retention in the medium to long-term, and eventually harm student learning.

I would add further that we need to have a much closer relationship between teachers and families. I am not talking merely about parent volunteers, but rather something more organic and transformative, where teachers and parents work to identify what a school should be and then advocate together for it with MCPS.

The PTA system, in which I have served in many positions since my children entered MCPS, works inconsistently. We have to find creative ways of connecting parents and teachers organically and for that to happen we need greater permeability between school and community. More direct contacts. More interaction before there is a crisis. A partnership of parents and teachers makes reform unstoppable.

**16. As a potential Board member, what do you believe needs to be done to increase public support – and County Council support – for our schools? Furthermore, what do you see as your role in accomplishing this goal?**

Board members have a pulpit they can use to generate public support for public education. Too often, and for reasons still mysterious to me, it is not the practice of board members to speak directly to the public. As Board member I would both seek direct public engagement and use the pulpit to generate public support for public education.

This may be a lot of inside baseball, but how should the BOE, not just MCPS, interact with County Council, County Executive, and the Planning Board? Public interaction between these bodies is highly ritualized in the form of budget presentations and their private interactions are not transparent to outsiders. To the public, it seems that the bulk of the negotiation regarding budgetary support is in the hands of MCPS itself. As the governing body, BOE could take a more active role in engaging with these groups, and demonstrate to the public that it is doing so.

**17. Do you support or oppose public charter schools? If you are in support, under what parameters should they operate?**

I do not support public charter schools in Montgomery County. Advocates of school choice have seen the greatest support when public education has failed in some respect. I am running for a BOE seat to improve the system, to help foster innovation, and to ensure we are adapting to coming challenges. I think we should consider some charter ideas such as non-traditional school design and use them for specialized programs.

**18. What ideas, providing detail, do you have to address the increasing time and workload demands on teachers?**

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At the root, we need to hire more teachers, staff, and counselors—and pay attention to class size and staff ratios.

Based on talking with MCPS and other teachers, including my campaign chair (who was my son's fifth-grade teacher), it is clear that teachers are stretched thin. In elementary school, teachers have little time to process the needs of all their students, to develop strong relationships with individual students and their families which is central to learning, and to promote health and wellness for students and themselves. In secondary schools, there needs to be more wraparound services and support staff at one end and more innovative and engaging coursework on the other, but MCPS has focused its compensatory education dollars on elementary schools. Overall, we need to address the shortages in special education and bilingual ESOL teachers.

In elementary schools, hiring more teachers should include hiring more teachers of music, art, and physical education. The special teachers bring rotational benefits and allow teachers planning time as well as the ability to deal with specific students. Smaller class size will benefit secondary schools as well. Specifically, we need to hire specialist teachers, including bilingual ESOL, and more support staff.

This is obviously a matter of finding the money. Education needs to be funded at higher levels. We expect gains from the funding of the Kirwan recommendations. As Board member, we have the further responsibility of spending what we get most efficiently and I am hopeful that we can rebalance capital and operating budgets to hire more teachers, staff, and counselors.

A second approach should examine the balance of teacher time between instructional and testing activities. Since the rise of the standards movement, testing and reporting time have eaten into actual teaching and learning time. The standards movement arose from the need to ensure consistency across race and socioeconomic divisions. However, the advent of computer-based education technology has vastly expanded the time teachers spend on testing and reporting, and now it seems that we might have overbalanced. Teachers now find it difficult as a result of the testing workload to build relationships with individual students and their families, which are central to learning outcomes.

A thoughtful review of where the balance ought to be should be part of BOE's work going forward. I would like to see the BOE invite all stakeholders to participate in a public process for determining some what kind of rebalancing can happen given that most standards are state and federal requirements. I am in favor of solution that enables teacher autonomy but also combines that effort with a big push toward teacher and staff diversity. I think we are repeatedly coming back to the core of why I am running for BOE: to find ways to hire more teachers and staff; to reduce class size; to find more time for planning and relationship-building; to prioritize teacher training and professional development. Without these steps, our commitments to closing the performance gap will remain weak.

**19. Share your perspective of how you view your role working with MCEA to understand and potentially advocate on behalf of our priorities?**

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MCEA is a major stakeholder in MCPS and I fully intend to have ongoing consultative, professional and personal relationships with MCEA, which I believe leads to the best outcomes for our students. I will consult, do so openly, respond without obfuscation, and seek to be a partner.

Board governance actions require coordinating the multiple perspectives that include students, families, teachers, administrators, and county residents. Understanding these perspectives is central to the task of coordination and relationships form basis of understanding.

As a general proposition, I believe board members should be publicly available to more stakeholders. Traditionally, board members remain buttoned up, but this is a new environment. Board members should have regular coffees with stakeholders, maybe have newsletters like Takoma Park City Council members (they are also part-time). I already host monthly social hours for parents and teachers and I fully intend to keep doing this.

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

Yes to lower class sizes. This is central to my philosophy and my campaign platform. I believe the Board should require class sizes because this is so central to the success of our education system. Two process thoughts.

First, the Board should consider class size not only on average for the entire system, but consider break downs by relevant category—grade level, poverty rate, English language needs, and if feasible, by subject. For example, having an extra music period could mean that half a grade does math and the other music/art and then flips. Math classes can be smaller. This is well into the weeds and my intention here is not to do that, so please see this as an example in need of further refinement and clarification. My point is that class size requirements could vary and have more nuance than a single metric.

Second, to determine the appropriate sizes, BOE should consider appointing an expert committee of teachers, administrators, union representatives, parents, and education experts to review class sizes and report back directly to the Board. This would ensure the recommendations are developed with adequate technical expertise and ideal stakeholder inclusion.

**21. What three things would you like to accomplish in the next four years if elected to the Board?**

Expand hiring of teachers, staff, and counselors to address class size and staff ratios.

Rebuild the home and school partnership to where teachers have the time to develop these relationships and ensure families, even those with significant stressors, can participate in their children’s education.

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Invest in the health and safety of our students and staff, including in mental health and wellness.

And find the money to do this.

**22. State your view of the contract between the Board of Education and MCEA. What changes, if any, would you seek?**

The best way to improve on the 2018-2020 contract is to bring focus on working conditions, in particular planning time, teacher professional development, and support for new teachers. My first priority speaks directly to this issue. I want to find ways to hire more teachers, staff, and counselors so that we can address planning time and class size concerns.

Furthermore, I emphasize as well the need to rethink teacher professional development. Too often professional development is seen as just a requirement instead of a source of excitement and even a path to advancement. For teachers to be effective, teachers need more time to work on lesson planning, engage in content learning, and pursue special coursework as necessary. Moreover, the ongoing effort to recast the wage schedule should ensure that beginning teachers are paid well, as this is important to recruitment in an era of teacher shortage.

**23. What do you see is the relationship of the BOE with the Superintendent?**

Currently, Board members work part-time and lack the administrative support necessary to adequately set and manage agendas and oversee the work of the MCPS. Thus, the Board is frequently in a reactive role with the Superintendent where a proactive role would be more productive towards achieving accountability.

The Board and the Superintendent need to develop a more robust communication process, ensuring that the Board is asking the right questions and that staff responses to Board questions are prompt and on-point. For comparison, the County Council works with similar amount of resources but has significantly larger staff to help. We need to consider potential solutions like shifting the Office of Sharing Accountability staff to BOE staff, to increase Board capacity for enhance data analysis and reporting, and to allow better communication and stakeholder involvement.

As Board member, I will bring strength to this relationship. I have 20 years of academic and research experience and strong interest in addressing knotty education policy problems. I have done this most recently with the boundary change issue, offering a process that can help mitigate the anger around the issue. See: <https://www.marylandmatters.org/2019/12/17/opinion-focus-on-process-to-get-school-redistricting-right/>. As a college professor, I have the flexibility to devote the time to the Board job and bring to bear considerable knowledge of government, organizations, education policy, and local politics. Rather than the Board job taking away time from my professional work, I see synergies where my Board experience informs my research and my research helps me be a better Board member.

**24. How will you get your information regarding what is happening within MCPS?**

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As a Board member, a big part of my job will be to stay abreast of what is happening inside MCPS. If elected to the Board, I will maintain relationships with the various MCPS offices and with stakeholders and visits schools as often as it is allowed. Subject to applicable rules, I would like to hold regular open-house type sessions to invite informal feedback around the county. I would publish a newsletter or other communications mechanism, perhaps monthly, to engage and inform residents and MCPS employees, and I would speak more freely than BOE members traditionally have done. I should also mention that over 90 percent of my students at UMBC at the Universities at Shady Grove are MCPS alumni and very informed about what's going on in schools.

I have two longer-term goals. First, I will work with other Board members to look into the possibility of moving the Office of Shared Accountability to the BOE staff to make data more readily available and answerable to policy questions raised by the Board.

Second, to bring MCPS to join the county open data platform and make schools data available in searchable and usable form. Currently MCPS provides data mainly in pdfs, which is cumbersome and not advocacy-friendly. I know one parent who has been putting together a time-series of enrollment data in an effort to figure out where MCPS enrollment projections have gone wrong and contributed to overcrowded and under-enrolled schools.

**25. As a member of the Board of Education, would you support honoring contracts, especially in tight fiscal times? Please explain your position.**

Contracts have to be honored because that's what makes it possible for MCPS to function. There is a regular schedule for negotiating contracts and this process has to be taken seriously. On the chance that the revenue situation in the county and the state were to go into steep decline, I would like to see the school system work together with all negotiating unions to develop a plan that moves us forward. I am also firmly of the view that relationships are built prior to crises occurring and if those relationships are honest and open, that's our best hope of weathering the crisis together.

Two long-term ideas toward that end. First, I would like MCPS to embrace the county open data platform so that there is transparency, knowledge and legitimacy. Second, we must think about rebalancing capital and operating budgets now so if there is a fiscal crisis, we have plans in place, and don't have to resort to emergency measures.

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

We talk a lot of about public education in the United States and even more so in Montgomery County, the wealthiest jurisdiction in the state of Maryland and one of the wealthiest in the entire country. To me, public education has a strong and clear public purpose: our schools should aim to produce productive and participatory citizens but also the public purpose mission implies equal access to all residents. This is very different from where I grew up in India where a child's

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education depends on the family resources, and state resources are targeted very selectively to those who are most likely to succeed.

This is not our system here and yet there are imbalances between schools, between zip codes, and sometimes between classrooms. I believe these imbalances can be addressed through a combination of resources, leadership, training, and relationships. Our resources come from the county and the state, but we are obligated to use these resources well. We need new thinking on this, which gets us to leadership and the relationship between the BOE, MCPS, County Council, and County Executive as well as to principals, administrators, and managers. We need to train teachers better, making the profession and the training in the profession more exciting. But first teachers need more time and smaller class size, and non-teaching staff need lower student ratios. Only then will teachers and staff be able to develop relationships with individual students and their families and address the biggest imbalance of them all: the performance gap.

If I am elected Board member, I will consult, do so openly, respond without obfuscation, and seek to be a partner to families, students, teachers, and administrators. I will bring to the Board energy, an open mind, and a willingness to explore and adopt innovative ideas to make our education system better. I will work hard and use research to inform by thinking and decisions.

I am a Montgomery County parent of 3 MCPS students, I have 20 years of classroom experience, ten of which have been in Montgomery County teaching mostly MCPS alumni.

I am a community organizer who brings people together. I have served as PTA President and Vice-president at Earle B. Wood Middle School and continue to serve as Rockville Cluster Coordinator. I am also a volunteer parent chair of MCCPTA's Health and Safety Committee, I have brought together different people, groups, and offices to address issues concerning school nutrition, mental health and wellness, substance use prevention, and safe technology.

Where in the past the Special Education and Gifted and Talented parents were among the best organized, we worked to make Health, Safety, and Wellness community in the system one of the most effervescent. The level of engagement on these issues shows in the fact that a majority of testimonies presented to the BOE at public hearings talk about these issues. Clearly, the national and international climate has contributed, but we have created a broad coalition on health and safety matters, including and especially on mental health and wellness.

In 2017, following three suicides in the school system, we began organizing a Mental Health and Wellness Forum in partnership with MCPS. Held on April 22, 2018 at Gaithersburg High School, more than 200 people attended. After the event, we decided to make it an annual occurrence and have held two more forums in 2019 and 2020.

The last one on Jan 11, 2020, attracted over 300 attendees. The keynote speaker was Dr. Raymond Crowel, director of the county Health and Human Services. We have more than 50 providers and 10 breakout sessions, including an onsite mindfulness class. We offered free Mental Health First Aid, the three Gaithersburg Cluster principals ran a workshop on trauma-informed schools, and the Montgomery County Police Department premiered its mock teen

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bedroom trailer, an education tool they have developed to warn parents about whether teenagers engaged in substance use might hide their contraband. The event was covered by local media: <http://towncourier.com/mcps-mccpta-hosts-mental-health-and-wellness-forum/>.

I am the organizer of a Facebook group, MoCo Mental Health and Wellness, whose purpose is to support the forums by fighting stigma, connecting families, teachers, and students with resources, and to advocate for youth mental health and wellness in the county. The group has 430 members.

I have taken the energy from the group into real community action beyond the forum. We are working on a project called “Postcards to Dentists” where we get county residents to write postcards to county dentists to encourage them to follow CDC guidelines on prescribing opioids to young people for wisdom tooth removal or other oral surgery. Pain medication for oral surgery is the first time young people are prescribed opioids. Hopefully, we can expand the project to include sports medicine specialists and pediatricians. Right now, I am working with county agencies to refine the language.

I also run another Facebook group called Parent-Teacher Exchange (294 members), which has become the venue for organizing Parent-Teacher Social Hours, also in real life. We have well-attended organized social hours every month since August 2019 (except November). These social hours are a rare public venue where teachers and parents come together socially. I strongly believe that developing relationships at a matter of course provides the ballast we need when we have crises to solve. If we wait for crises to talk about building relationships, we are not being forward thinking.

Toward that end, I will look into BOE’s traditions and prohibitions of open communication between Board members and the public. I will use all means at my disposal to open two-way communications in the BOE.

I have also worked in two other areas as an education advocate. I work with environmental groups to enhance environmental education in schools, including professional development, and to help MCPS transition from fossil fuels. We have made some progress here to begin a dialog with MCPS. I would love to see MCPS move school buses to electric and more solar generation on school roofs. I believe there is industry funding available. I also work with pedestrian activists because I am concerned in about student safety on the streets and would like to see improvements in bus stop choices and walk routes. I would like to see all school buses have GPS tracking not only so parents know when they should expect buses to arrive but also to improve bus routing itself.

I bring 20 years of academic and research experience and the interest to address knotty policy problems. I lead an academic program, conduct academic research, and work with complex and intractable issues. I have experience with using, manipulating, and analyzing data and datasets. I have experience reading and reporting on financial statements and legal documents. I have done this most recently with the boundary change issue, offering a process that can help mitigate the

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anger around the issue. See: <https://www.marylandmatters.org/2019/12/17/opinion-focus-on-process-to-get-school-redistricting-right/>.

As a college professor, I have the flexibility to devote the time to the Board job and bring to bear considerable knowledge of government, organizations, education policy, and local politics. Rather than the Board job taking away time from my professional work, I see synergies where my Board experience informs my research and my research helps me be a better Board member. In the past, I am told there was a tradition of professors serving on the BOE for these very reasons and I hope to revive that legacy.

I have written about local education politics. See here: <https://www.sunildasgupta.com/research-and-writing.html>. Please note the op-ed series in Source of the Spring and my op-ed in Maryland Matters, which I think can help us come out of the boundary change debate with positive forward-looking steps.

Also, leveraging my work life, I have experience in higher education program development that I can use to inform much needed rethinking of teacher professional development.

I am offering three big ideas to address the major education challenges we face.

#### **Where can we find the money?**

MCPS has two major courses of the funding, the County and the State. The leadership in the General Assembly is trying to fully fund the [Kirwan Commission recommendations](#). As Maryland comes together in support of Kirwan funding, we must join the call to make sure that the state and county governments step up to provide the resources and advocate for increases in state and county allocations to MCPS.

We can find further resources by rebalancing capital and operating budgets. The current MCPS Capital Improvements Program (CIP) is \$1.82 billion, which requires \$1.2 billion in new bonds (money the county government borrows) with a requirement to repay them at a cost of close to \$100 million annually. Reassigning students from overcrowded schools to under-enrolled schools can make it possible to shift financial resources to a hiring expansion and to school buildings in great need of repair. It actually has several benefits.

- By reducing the need for new buildings, MCPS will decrease the new bond amounts and the annual cost of repayment of those bonds. For every \$100 million reduced in bonds, MCPS will save \$8 million, about the salary of 100 new teachers.
- School that had been overcrowded will receive less per/student funding, but will decrease or even eliminate costs associated with overcrowding, like rental of portables.
- Schools that had been under-enrolled will get increased per/student funding to support associated expenses.
- School buildings that have been long-neglected will see repair and renovation quicker.



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This kind of reprioritization requires assertive leadership within the BOE and a willingness to work with the county government, the county council, and with the state.

**How do we make teaching and working in MCPS more attractive and prestigious and train teachers and staff better?**

There is a teacher shortage nationally. There are fewer teacher training colleges and new teachers are leaving within years of starting in the profession. Hiring and keeping teachers requires more resources, but also requires we elevate the profession, improve work conditions, support teacher autonomy, and build in extra time for teachers to develop relationships with individual students and families. Three decades of emphasizing standards have reduced teacher autonomy and eroded the relationships that were and should be the foundation of teaching. We must find ways to restore the balance between standards and other activities that contribute to successful teaching, including teacher autonomy, relationship building, and career advancement that allows classroom teachers to remain in the classroom and not have to take on administrative responsibilities for the sake of promotions.

Teacher and staff training time is scarce and can be expensive. Hiring more teachers and staff will help, but all teachers and staff - especially those who are new to the profession - need effective training and professional development. Too often professional development is seen as just a requirement instead of a source of excitement and even a path to advancement. In order for teachers to be effective, teachers need more time to work on lesson planning, engage in content learning, and pursue special coursework.

To reinvigorate training, involve teachers in developing and managing professional development. One possibility might be to look at longer contracts for new teachers to include more training time. Another would be to allow more planning and training time during the year in addition to offering professional development opportunities beyond the graduate courses at Hood College. And with increased hiring that adds planning time, a third possibility could be to encourage more group-based professional development through which handfuls of teachers gather to develop their own learning programs.

**How to improve student engagement to address the performance gap?**

Central to understanding the performance gap is to enhance student engagement in learning. In 20 years of classroom experience, I found that students engage better when they wrestle with content. In my own teaching experience, I have found that students come to study political science (which I teach) because they love politics and want to learn about government and governance, not necessarily because they want to learn the science of the study of politics. Similarly, a student wants to be a botanist because she loves trees and plants, not necessarily the scientific method.

Driven by federal and state standards and testing over the last 20 years, MCPS has moved steadily toward more skills-based education emphasizing literacy and math skills over actual content areas. In the process, we seemed to have lost the content hooks that students caught

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to develop strong subject matter interests that then became the basis for the higher order learning like critical thinking and complex problem-solving. We see this manifest in the difference between advanced and regular coursework. Of the academic subjects, science and civics appear to have been relegated most of all.

Now it is our job as teachers to equip students with the higher order analytical skills including the scientific method, but skills development is seldom learned without strong interest in content. The emphasis on higher-order skills, sometimes at the cost of content education, has caused students to wonder why they are learning these skills and to disengage from the classroom.

The challenge is most difficult with English-language learners because it manifests as a chicken and egg problem. Without language, they cannot get to content, but equally I would say without being piqued by content, students are not likely to engage. I have personally had success with limited English proficiency students when I have emphasized content and allowed English-language skills to catch up, including allocating a high percentage of score to content and a lower percentage to grammar and style for certain assignments.

One specific idea I have been exploring is to introduce age-appropriate brain science and brain development curriculum from upper elementary through high school. We already have a workforce focus in the county on the life sciences, but this learning could also help students better understand their own brain development and manage stress and anxiety better.

A second specific idea I had was to boost student journalism programming as a way to enhance social studies learning and civic engagement alongside literacy and social skills building.

**27. 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 a competitive candidate because I believe I have a clear message, strong connections around the county geographically and functionally across key organizing areas such as public education, health and safety, environment and climate change, transit and pedestrian safety, and as an educator in county institutions of higher education serving mainly MCPS graduates. I believe my message centered on expanded hiring of teachers, staff, and counselors will resonate with county residents, families, teachers, staff, and all those who support public education.

It should come as no surprise given my views that teachers and staff are among my strongest supporters. I believe we need to work with teachers and staff if we want to close the achievement, enhance content education, and rebuild the home and school partnership.

I have built a strong campaign team. My campaign chair, Angelo Parodi, was my son's 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher from when we lived in Washington DC. Mr. Parodi is a Takoma Park resident who still works in the same school my kids went to in DCPS when we lived there and serves as the

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building rep for DC Teacher Union. He brings a public school teacher's perspective and helps us develop campaign positions and strategy. My campaign treasurer, Jamison Adcock, is a veteran of civic association politics in the county and a key liaison to the civic associations. We have a two-person website, social media, and communication team, a coordinator for questionnaires, and we are in the process of identifying a field/volunteer coordinator to hire. There are several other volunteers who have picked up different parts of campaign work.

Apart from MCEA, I hope to win the endorsement of the SEIU500 and MCGEO. I am reaching out to those organizations. I have reached out to other progressive groups in the county, including political groups such as Montgomery County DSA, Our Revolution, among others.

Lastly, we have a mid-February goal of raising money \$30,000 and have lined up a series of fundraisers to get there.