

2020 Red Maryland Board of Education Candidate Survey

Red Maryland is distributing this survey to all candidates for county Boards of Education. These candidate surveys will influence the decision-making of Red Maryland editors in issued candidate endorsements during the Republican primary. If you choose to participate, your answers will be published in their entirety at RedMaryland.com. If you choose not to participate, we will note that we did not receive feedback from you. If you have any questions please contact us at redmaryland@gmail.com or 410-205-4875. Thank you for your time.

Name

Sunil Dasgupta

Age

51

County

Montgomery

Education

Ph.D. Political Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Career/Occupation

Teacher/Professor

Education Experience

I am a parent of 3 MCPS students and have 20 years of classroom teaching and policy research experience, 11 teaching MCPS graduates. I have worked with budgets, financial reports, and data. I have been a PTA leader and founded the annual Mental Health and Wellness Forum for students, staff, and families. I have served on various school-related MCPS and county committees including on health, safety, use of screens, and the Planning Board's Subdivision Staging Policy and I have written publicly on education issues and testified before the Board of Education, County Council, and other forums. For more, please visit <https://www.sunildasgupta.com/research-and-writing.html>

Political Experience

First time political candidate

Website

Sunildasgupta.com

Social Media Accounts

Twitter and Instagram: @sunildasgupta Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/SunilforSchoolBoard/>

Please provide a link to a photograph you wish to have associated with your survey. If no photograph is provided, we will use the standard Red Maryland logo.

[1OfQS1gHrxpjPrXhkcfv0di/view?usp=sharing](https://www.flickr.com/photos/1OfQS1gHrxpjPrXhkcfv0di/view?usp=sharing)

Why are you running for office?

Education does not arrive magically to our students. We face unprecedented challenges with teacher retention and balancing resource allocation. I want to hire more teachers and staff, reduce class size, rebuild the home/school partnership, and invest in the health, safety, and wellness. Where is the money? We have to make sure the state and county fully fund schools, and I hope to rebalance capital and operating budgets to stretch the money we have.

Who do you consider your political role model, and why?

Vaclav Havel. Dissident, poet, scholar, and former president of the Czech Republic. His sense of the agency of ordinary human beings in face of structural political oppression is awe-inspiring.

What is your favorite book about politics and policy, and why?

Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. The clearest analysis of what we do when we want to see reform in organizations we are part of. How and when do we voice protest and when do we exit the system.

What is your favorite book about education, and why?

Not narrowly about education in schools, but more broadly on observation, wonder, knowledge, and learning. Alexandra Horowitz's *On Looking*. The book is a reporting of 11 walks she took with experts to places we do not think of as learning locations. Must read for all teachers.

What will be your top priority on the Board of Education?

To find the money to expand hiring of teachers, staff, and counselors to address class size and staff ratios; rebuild the home and school partnership; and invest in the health and safety of our students and staff, including in mental health and wellness.

What is the biggest issue facing your county schools?

While school boundaries may be the runaway issue, our focus should absolutely be on closing the performance gap while enabling students who are doing well to do even better. There is no one silver bullet, but hiring more staff is step one toward reducing staff ratios; retaining and training teachers better; improving rigor and content in the curriculum; targeting resources to those who need it most; rebuilding the home and school partnership; and enabling investments in health, safety, and wellness. To do all of this, we need a strong BOE to secure resources, reprioritize, and rebalance capital and operating budgets.

What is your position on the Kirwan Commission recommendations?

I support the recommendations of the Kirwan Commission.

What are the three biggest issues facing Maryland schools?

Performance Gap. Teacher retention. Health, safety, and wellness of students and staff.

Have you read your county schools curriculum? If so, which parts do you like and which parts do you dislike?

MCPS curriculum, as other Maryland school systems, is focused on language literacy and math skills almost exclusively in K-8. High schools expand content education to include some science, but really depend on IB and AP curriculum (not determined by the county) for content education. The new algebraic math teaching is superior than what we had in the past. We need to revisit phonetic reading instruction. Civics education, student journalism, brain science, health and wellness, are neglected topic areas, and even the push for STEM has not led to robust coding knowledge among our students. Overall, we need more content education, and we have to recognize that no matter how good any curriculum is, we need qualified, well-trained, and well-supported teachers to deliver learning to our children. Small class size and staff ratios, strong home and school connection, are critical to making learning happen.

What is your position on school spending?

We have find the money to fully fund our schools but my campaign is also predicated on using what we have better including rebalancing capital and operating budgets. For example, if we save \$100 million in school construction, we can save \$8 million in annual debt repayment. That is the salary of 100 teachers. But money alone is not the whole answer. I would like to see MCPS become more transparent and open with data and for schools to develop new ways of engaging families and communities.

The question following this one is asking us to select from a prewritten list of priority areas for school funding. In my view, this list is incomplete. It does not include class size/staff ratio reduction as an option. It does not include family engagement as an option, and does not include student and staff health, safety, and wellness as an option. These are critical to improving learning outcomes in my view and, while I will make choices in the list below, my priorities are not best captured in the list/question.

Please identify the three areas which you believe should be prioritized when it comes to school funding

Choices: Teacher Training. School Maintenance. Curriculum Development. These are my choices from the list below. The list is incomplete in my view.

Athletics

Administration Benefits

Administration Pay

Arts Programs

Classroom Technology/Computers

Curriculum Development
Extracurricular Activities
Foreign Language Programs
Media
Music Programs
New School Construction
School Maintenance
Security
Special Education
STEM Programs
Teacher Benefits
Teacher Pay
Teacher Training
Technology Programs
Test Preparation
Textbooks
Transportation
Vocational Skills

What is your position on teacher tenure?

I support teacher tenure as a key part of professionalizing and elevating the teaching profession in turn to address teacher retention and shortage. We have to stop treating teachers as saints (and underpaying them in the name of teaching as a calling) and treat teachers as professionals worthy of our respect; recognized for their insights into the classroom, which is their workplace; well-trained in subject matter and pedagogy; able to develop their own standards as other professions do; and protected from arbitrary political retribution. Teacher tenure is analogous to the merit system in civil service ushered in by the Progressive Era led by, among others, Teddy Roosevelt. There is an underlying question here: What do we do with bad teachers? There are bad teachers as there are bad professors, doctors, lawyers, and financial managers. Every profession has its standards and develops its own sorting mechanisms and tenure is not a protection from bad performance. What keeps bad teachers in place is really the teacher shortage and retention problem, which needs to be addressed first.

What is your position on standardized testing?

The standards movement arose in the 1990s from the need to ensure consistency across race and socioeconomic divisions. The advent of computer-based education technology vastly expanded testing and with it the time teachers spend it, and now it seems that we have overbalanced.

Teachers complain about being stretched thin and becoming data-gatherers more than teachers. Teachers appear to have little time to process the needs of all their students, to plan, to develop relationships with students and their families central to learning, and to promote health and wellness for students and themselves. Many students, including my own children, complain about excessive testing.

The kicker is that the performance gap remains significant and has even grown somewhat in the last decade. Now testing time is not responsible for all of this, but a thoughtful review of where the balance ought to be should be part of BOE's work going forward.

What is your position on classroom size?

Reducing class size and staff ratios by hiring more teachers, staff, and counselors is the central plank of my campaign. This comes down to money. We must ask that our schools be fully funded but also use what we have better including by rebalancing capital and operating budgets. This will require a strong BOE to reprioritize, to rebalance resource allocation, and to negotiate with the county and the state.

Do you believe the Board of Education should have taxation authority?

No. There are too many historical and institutional barriers. In principle though, it is a good to combine spending and taxing authority to encourage fiscal discipline.