



**SIERRA
CLUB**

July 2020

**Questionnaire for Montgomery County Board of Education
Candidates**

Most of Montgomery County Sierra Club's attention is focused on the County Council, the Planning Board, and key departments (especially Dept of Transportation and Dept of Environmental Protection). However, the decisions of the Board of Education also play a critical role in addressing climate change and other issues of concern to the Sierra Club. Thus, we have chosen this year to make endorsements in the BoE elections. We offer you an opportunity to tell us about your experience and viewpoints on several issues of concern to Sierra Club. If you choose to fill out this questionnaire, we thank you in advance on behalf of the 6,000 members of Montgomery County Sierra Club.

Please note that your answers may be posted on our website and/or otherwise shared.

Please answer each question, using no more than 10 sentences per numbered question.

GENERAL

- 1. Why are you running for the Board of Education? What are your major qualifications? Please list any relevant boards, committees, or commissions on which you have served (and number of years on each). In what ways have these leadership experiences given you an understanding of Montgomery County, its challenges and opportunities? How have these experiences prepared you to serve on the Board of Education?**

Our schools face tough challenges of academic and social-emotional losses, equity, and budget constraints. I am running to help improve academic performance and student welfare in MCPS, but I also know that as the largest energy consumer, building owner, transportation operator, and food service provider in the county, MCPS has social responsibilities alongside educating students.

I am a first-generation immigrant, a parent of 3 MCPS students, an educator in the county, a PTA leader (MCCPTA Board member, Health and Wellness Committee Chair, and Rockville Cluster Coordinator), and the founder-organizer of the Annual Mental Health and Wellness Forum for families, students, and school staff. I was a member of the 2020 Class of Leadership Montgomery and have participated in Vision Zero and Action Committee for Transit activities.

Since 2009, I have led an academic program at UMBC at The Universities at Shady Grove, where I have taught hundreds of MCPS graduates, developed curriculum, scheduled courses, hired and managed faculty, recruited, taught and mentored students and supported their placement. I have also taught online classes for the last seven years, which is particularly relevant right now.

Together these experiences have given me a broad understanding of the central role MCPS plays in the county as a driver of its attractiveness, as the largest employer and energy consumer, and as a major user of resources in a diverse and evolving jurisdiction, and they have helped me develop vision, creative solutions, knowledge of academic management, and a broad stakeholder coalition that I can bring to the BOE.

Given the importance of public education to the county's long-term health, fighting to improve MCPS helps support social good including climate change, affordable housing, and equity.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Schools and other MCPS facilities can serve as community models for energy efficiency

- 2. It is good that MCPS is currently paying more attention to energy efficiency than a few years ago. However, if MCPS is going to be a strong community partner in addressing climate change, there is plenty more to do. What do you intend to do to push MCPS to increase the energy efficiency of its buildings?**

To improve energy efficiency, MCPS needs to build less, use existing facilities better, and reduce carbon footprint.

MCPS should upgrade and centralize its energy management system, replace HVACs, and improve maintenance. Going forward, we need to ensure that new buildings meet energy efficiency standards and are equipped with sensors and controls that allow centralized energy management. For older buildings, we need to look at HVAC systems and stronger maintenance protocols.

One question I have is whether MCPS has people with the right skills in place to make significant progress in energy efficiency.

- 3. What do you intend to do to increase the percentage of MCPS energy that comes from wind and solar? What is your stance on solar at school sites (including roofs, open land, parking areas)?**

MCPS should seriously consider rooftop solar and energy management contracts. The question is, how to pay for the improvements?

I have been working with a group from the Montgomery County Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions (MC-FACS) who is using Sierra Club's 100 percent Clean Energy School Districts Campaign organizing toolkit to push MCPS toward a more responsible energy policy. As part of these organizing meetings, we have met with business leaders who have laid out a path for commercial financing. The downside is that energy management contracts are really long-term commitments.

The other option is municipal "green" bonds. Interest rates are low, but bonding is in the hands of the county, which has its own priorities over which the BOE has little say.

Without a countywide discussion on these issues, it is unclear if more bonding or energy management contracts is the better option, so it is important for the BOE to take a leadership role in initiating these discussions in the county.

The county also has the Renewable Energy Credits (REC) program that MCPS could join at minimal cost (some estimates say, \$70,000), but RECs are short-term measure and local and clean generation should be the goal.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation is a critical piece of the school system

- 4. Most children get to/from school on a bus. What would you do to increase the efficiency of the school's bus system? For instance, what about electric buses? For instance, in down county locations, what about having some children use the already in-place Ride-On or Metrobus (or the Purple Line)?**

About 60 percent of all MCPS students commute to school on school buses. Introducing a GPS-based, route-optimization system would improve bus routing efficiency immediately, but in the medium to long-term, MCPS has to move to electric buses and toward generating the electric power for the buses cleanly on site.

A large conversion like this could very well be the basis of a green new deal for the county.

Like rooftop solar, there is also commercial funding available for fleet conversion to electric, also as part of a long-term energy management contract.

But with interest rates this low, a special "green" bond might also be attractive. To determine which option is better, we need an open discussion. If elected, I would urge the BOE to lead this discussion.

- 5. Some parents drive their children to school. Some HS students drive themselves to school. What would you do to discourage such driving? On the flip side, what would you do to encourage more children walking or biking to school?**

Many high school students take transit already in down county, but MCPS is obligated to provide bus service to every student beyond its walk zones. The Kids Ride Free program is certainly an incentive for high school students to take Ride-On, but the level of service does not make Ride-On a viable alternative except in downcounty abutting Washington DC. We can only make transit a viable option if service is frequent and reliable. Right now, it is not. Since this is not in the hands of the BOE, I would—and do—advocate with County Council and County Executive to improve bus service.

Lastly, we have to use the Planning Department's ongoing countywide walk audit to improve walk zones and reduce hazard busing in planning. MCPS must work together with the Planning Department, MCDOT, and MDSHA on these issues.

SMART GROWTH

For our county, development guided by Smart Growth principles is a critical part of addressing climate change; MCPS can make an important difference here

- 6. In suburban Montgomery County, new schools have been designed using the "traditional" 1950s model – a short building (usually 1-2 stories tall), on a very large lot, with plenty of parking and large playing fields. Are you willing to push MCPS to embrace a different model for new schools (and existing schools**

undergoing major renovations)? Please address specifically your view on less parking, taller school buildings, smaller acreage.

I will absolutely push MCPS—and really the Maryland State Department of Education and the Board of Public Works' Interagency Commission on School Construction—toward new school design consistent with changing development and demographic trends, including less parking, taller school buildings, smaller acreage. I think all those choices should be part of the local school design decision.

In this context, it is also important to point out that I am the only candidate to offer detailed plans for a policy of regular, systemwide, and transparent school boundary review and adjustment that rebalances students and resources. In effect, school boundary review and adjustment allows the school system to build less and check its carbon footprint. It is important that Sierra Club Montgomery County speak out loudly and effectively about the importance of regular boundary review and adjustment. See more here: <https://www.sunildasgupta.com/priorities.html>

- 7. Smart Growth aims to create compact neighborhoods where many places that folks want and need to go are located within walking distance of each other. MCPS could play a part. Co-location of other uses with schools could make a difference. What do you think about co-location of housing, libraries, community centers, Parks Dept playgrounds and fields with schools?**

I support colocation as much as possible. The problem of colocation is not the concept or the design but coordinating the needs of different agencies. This is primarily a function of the county government, but MCPS can help the process by proposing innovative ideas. In Poolesville, for example, the community has wanted a health center with a new school building. While the school building has been funded (per the last CIP), DHHS has not seen the need for a health center in far west county. In contrast, the School Based Health Centers in four MCPS high schools are all considered to be very successful. These centers serve the community and school students.

EQUITY

Sierra Club's national Executive Director, Michael Brune, has stated that "we cannot successfully tackle either climate change or inequality without addressing both" As you know, Montgomery County has a pronounced east-west divide – with more affluent folks and more jobs generally located in the western parts of the county. There are, of course, a variety of other factors that disadvantage students of color and those from lower income households

- 8. What do you see as the role of MCPS in addressing these equity issues?**

Addressing equity needs a multipronged approach including curriculum, staff diversity, cultural competency, and resource allocation. I am the only candidate in the BOE race to offer detailed plans for a policy of regular, systemwide, and transparent school boundary review and adjustment that rebalances students and resources so that we have long-term balance. Without a policy of regular boundary review and adjustment, the impact of other reforms, especially in staff and resource allocation, erode and we have to play catch up constantly. See more here: <https://www.sunildasgupta.com/priorities.html>

CURRICULUM

The MCPS curriculum is providing the knowledge foundation of future voters and leaders

9. What will you do to ensure that the MCPS curriculum enables students to gain a solid understanding of environmental issues, especially climate change?

MCPS offers high-quality climate change education from elementary to high school, but there is plenty for room for improvement, beginning with additional outdoor education opportunities (currently offered just once in all of middle and high school), and local, hands-on, environmental programming. We also see many MCPS students at the forefront of climate action and leadership. Students and faculty leaders interested in environmental conservation also work together in the School Energy and Recycling Teams.

If elected, I would advocate for an expansion of the MCPS environmental curriculum and include more outdoor education and hands-on environmental programming I would also push MCPS to practice what it teaches. For example, students are learning about climate change and pollution in schools where energy use is too high, and lunches are filled with single-use plastic. The list of shortcomings is long and disconcerting, and we have serious work to do on improving the traditional curriculum and making the learning environment sustainable.

FOOD

Schools provide many thousands of meals a day

10. What is your stance on how the schools should treat the opportunities to use school meals for multiple purposes (beyond the obvious of feeding hungry kids)? Please address such matters as childhood obesity, local foods, healthy foods, composting, school gardens. In terms of composting, please address the ways in which the current MCPS composting program should be expanded

I would like to see scratch cooking back in schools. I am told this is idealistic given that bulk of MCPS lunch supplies come from U.S. Department of Agriculture's School Lunch program and some of this food is processed and packed in ways beyond the control of MCPS, but I think it is possible. Jamie Oliver, Tony Geraci, and Sam Kass have shown that it is. We should begin with school gardens, which should be grown by students as part of the curriculum, and their produce used in school lunches and for community events. We will enhance community partnerships, and there has never been a better time for us to embrace outdoor learning.

I would also like to see schools compost their food scraps. Our family composts all of our food waste; we do not send any organic waste to the county and have not for a few years.

My youngest child, a third-grader last year, stopped purchasing school lunches because she was upset about how much plastic is used in them. MCPS can do better and reduce costs over the long term. I will be a strong advocate for making our school lunches healthier for children and better for the environment.

OTHER

Safe playgrounds and playing fields are important

11. What is your position on synthetic turf?

I do not support synthetic turf and will work to help schools have natural grass fields and, more importantly, help keep them usable by student athletes. Maintenance has been an issue and natural grass fields need good drainage systems for proper maintenance. Turf fields spending calculations also do not take into account disposal costs. We need to work toward grass fields, perhaps, in collaboration with the Department of Parks and Recreation, which successfully maintains natural grass fields. I have relationships with longtime local safe fields activists who have been fighting for this issue for years and hope to work with them to bring about this change.

Thank you for completing the Sierra Club questionnaire!

Please submit your questionnaire no later than 5 pm EDT on August 9, 2020. Please submit to Shruti Bhatnagar at shruti_bhatnagar@yahoo.com as a PDF attachment to an email. We plan to schedule interviews on August 12-13. Please contact Susan Nerlinger at [<snerlinger@earthlink.net>](mailto:snerlinger@earthlink.net) to schedule your interview. Note that your interview will be cancelled if you do not submit your questionnaire.