

2020 Board of Education (BOE) Primary Election Candidate Questionnaire

Please return the completed questionnaire to contact@bettermontgomery.us by 5:00pm on Friday, January 31, 2020.

Name: Stephen Austin
Town or City of Residency: Bethesda
Education: BFA Studio Art/Computer Science
Professional Background: Finance
Political Background: None, other than voting

I confirm that the responses provided here are my official positions in seeking BOE office and I understand that Coalition for Better Montgomery PAC reserves the right to share my responses with the public.

Candidate Signature:

Date:

Part 1

1. Why do you want to serve on BOE? I believe we need to restore transparency and accountability to the BOE.
2. Why do you consider yourself the best candidate for the BOE seat you filed for? Mostly from my political activism against the way the boundary analysis was established and Policy FAA was changed. I started a facebook group and 501c4 to assist in that.
3. What are your top three priorities if you are elected? Re-examine Policy FAA, have an independent third party audit the WXY process/contract, advocate for closing the achievement gap at LOCAL schools.

Part 2

4. BOE Policy-Making and Policy-Interpreting

What issues do you see the BOE has in its policy-making and policy-interpreting process? How would you improve the current process? I believe the number one issue is that the BOE has allowed itself to be heavily influenced by special interests, and has not sufficiently engaged with the main stakeholders of the school system - parents and taxpayers. If that is corrected, I believe policy will be more in synch.

5. Operating Budget

What issues do you see in the FY2021 MCPS operating budget? What would you do differently? The biggest issue for me is the paltry level of expense reductions. I believe increases in funding are necessary, but I also believe that the BOE should more aggressively "self-help" by cutting expenses or looking at creative revenue generating opportunities like real estate optimization. I would push for a harder look at both.

6. Curriculum

Do you believe MCPS curriculum is rigorous enough? What specific improvements would you suggest? I believe it is, but improvements could always be made. Of the 25 high schools, 17 have more than 30 AP courses, and there are a large number of online courses offered as well. I think we could look at expanding magnet programs and creating specialty programs in schools that do not currently have them.

7. School Boundary

Do you agree with the recent revisions of policy FAA in which one factor, demographic characteristics of student population, was elevated above the other three factors (geography, stability of school assignments over time and facility utilization)? Do you think it is necessary to conduct a countywide school boundary analysis based on this change? If so, what action would you like the BOE to take in

the future as a result of the information provided by the boundary analysis? I do not believe that FAA should have been changed to elevate diversity without sufficient community engagement first. This was not addressed, so I think we should roll it back and give the community that opportunity. If the community supports it, ok. I believe we should have a boundary analysis, but I have serious questions about the process as it stands with WXY. There have been too many changes and unanswered questions about many topics for the community to feel comfortable or even to understand what the ultimate goal is. In the future, I would prefer that the BOE keep kids local, even if that involves some minor boundary changes to balance capacity. I would also like to see those local schools try programs that actually show promise of effectively closing the achievement gap. In particular, a case study from MCPS's own history (Broad Acres) should be analyzed and have best practices applied.

8. Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)

Many of MCPS buildings are aging and in need of repair, updating, and in some cases, replacement. How would you set priorities for school construction and renovation? Currently, I understand that new capacity takes priority, and this makes sense. But if we can creatively generate additional revenue in the budget or cut unnecessary expense, perhaps we could free up additional funding to address both concurrently.

9. Gifted and Talented (GT) Program

BOE has changed how GT programs are administered in recent years. Do you consider these changes having a positive or negative impact? What initiatives will you undertake to ensure that the needs of GT students are met? Some of the changes as I understand them are quite controversial in terms of what populations have been limited in acceptance at these programs. I believe the most qualified students should be accepted, and also that we provide resources for all students at a young age to develop effectively and increase their chances of being competitive.

10. Opportunity Gap

What metrics would you use to measure the opportunity gap among students? Do you think BOE/MCPS has initiated and implemented policies and programs successfully to reduce the opportunity gap? What specific ideas or proposals do you have to close the opportunity gap? I would keep the measures the same, but implement new programs at a small scale first, with the goal of expanding them upon success. In particular, employing capable principals that are empowered to enable their teachers to engage in small classes, with the right resources for the particular populations. That involves incentivizing the teachers willing to take on these projects as well. This is very similar to how Broad Acres found success. I am also a big supporter of early childhood education, but realize Kirwan is looking to address this in the near future. In the meantime, I would support selective programs if resources were available.

11. Kirwan Commission

Do you support the recommendations by the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education (Kirwan Commission) and why? I believe the Kirwan Plan has very good intentions and the early childhood care and education, in particular, I support. The part of Kirwan I worry about from MCPS perspective is that the increased Maryland tax burden in the county will make increased county budgets a difficult ask. That is also why I believe in creative revenue opportunities and cutting expenses where possible. MCPS has to be able to generate whatever funds it can in any environment.