

## 2020 Board of Education (BOE) Primary Election Candidate Questionnaire

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

**Name:** Dr. Sunil Dasgupta

**Town or City of Residency:** Montgomery County

**Education:** PhD, Political Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

**Professional Background:** Political Science professor

**Political Background:** Registered Democrat

*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 am running for BOE to bring change to how we have been doing managing public education in the county. I want to find ways to hire more teachers and staff; to reduce class size; to find more time for planning and relationship-building; to rebuild the home and school partnership; to prioritize teacher training and professional development so that all our students have the opportunity to excel. Achieving these goals come down to money. The state and the county are likely to support increased funding to meet the goals of the Kirwan Commission, but we will need more. I hope to rebalance capital and operating budgets to find some of this money. 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. Reducing class size benefits those who students are falling behind and those students who are ahead and need to accelerate. 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.

2. Why do you consider yourself the best candidate for the BOE seat you filed for?

I believe I am the best candidate for the at large BOE seat because I have a unique and expert perspective on public education in Montgomery County. I am college professor and 90 percent of my students are MCPS graduates. I am a parent of 3 MCPS students who are in elementary, middle, and high schools, respectively. I am a researcher interested in public policy including education policy. I have experience using data, datasets, financial reports, and legal documents. I will bring to the BOE strong experience in analysis and academic investigation.

I am also a community organizer. I have been a PTA president and vice-president. I am on the Board of MCCPTA as Rockville Cluster Coordinator and Health and Wellness Committee Chair. I was awarded Dad4PTA Award in 2018.

I have organized three annual youth mental health and wellness forums between 2018-2020 with the objective of fighting stigma, connecting students, families, and staff to resources; and to build a coalition to support youth mental health and wellness in the county. Our last forum this January 11, brought over 300 people together. There were over 50 providers; over 30 presenters; and many others.

I am the organizer of the Parent-Teacher Exchange, a group designed to improve direct relationships between schools and homes. And I sit on many MCPS committees that allow me to learn about the school system, which with 166,00 students and 208 schools is gigantic by any measure.

3. What are your top three priorities if you are elected?

- Hire more teachers, staff, and counselors so we can reduce class size and reduce support staff ratios. This will enable teachers and staff to more effectively meet individual students' needs, develop relationships with families so teachers and parents can work together for improved learning outcomes, and help students with social-emotional skills that support academic results.
- Rebuild the home and school partnership to forge a close and mutually cooperative collaboration between teachers and families. Right now, parents/guardians who can be at the schools tend to have the strongest of these relationships while most others interact with teachers only occasionally, like during parent-teacher conferences. While most teachers try to provide helpful information and more parents/guardians are trying to absorb the information, really it can be more like speed-dating than a meaningful engagement in the best interest of the students. To help students through improved home/school relationships, schools need more teachers, staff, and counselors so that class sizes are smaller (back to point 1).
- Invest in student and staff health, safety, and training including mental health and wellness to promote school climate and effective teaching. Two steps can help: hiring more counselors, psychologists, and social workers who provide can mental health support (back to point 1) and including new content, for example, on brain development, the history of mental health treatment, the chemistry of disorders, and related matters as part of our curriculum.

## **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?

BOE is the governing body of MCPS, but it has no staff of its own. Indeed, the governance of a \$2.8 billion organization is considered to be a part-time job. If elected, I would like to move the evaluation unit of the Office of Shared Accountability from MCPS

to BOE staff so that BOE can have access to independent analysis of MCPS data to help make better decisions.

## **5. Operating Budget**

What issues do you see in the FY2021 MCPS operating budget? What would you do differently?

I would prioritize and seek significant increases in the operating budget to fund my primary priority of hiring more teachers, staff, and counselors to make a dent in class size, allow teachers time to develop relationships with individual students and families, and invest in health, safety, and wellness of our students and staff.

## **6. Curriculum**

Do you believe MCPS curriculum is rigorous enough? What specific improvements would you suggest?

I would like to see vastly increased content education come back to MCPS. I want to see this across the board in science, in civics education, and in experiential learning. As an example, I would like to see age-appropriate brain science and brain development curriculum added not only to enable students to enter an area of emerging science but also to help students better manage mental health and wellness. Similarly, I would like to see a big push on student journalism of all kinds, which can help enhance civics education as well as help MCPS students join the hundreds of news bureaus that operate in the Washington DC region.

## **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?

Yes, I believe it is necessary for MCPS/BOE to develop a process to review and adjust to population and demographic change regularly. Further, that this adjustment needs to be systemwide and not isolated to certain clusters. I have written extensively about this. I recommend reading this oped that I wrote which I think addresses many of the criticisms raised by those who oppose boundary adjustments:

<https://www.marylandmatters.org/2019/12/17/opinion-focus-on-process-to-get-school-redistricting-right/> I don't think we can solve all the problems in one, two, or even five years, but my goal is to put in place a process that will help us move to a system of incremental change over the long-term.

With respect to FAA revisions, I think there was and continues to be plenty of leeway the BOE can exercise under both the earlier and current phrasing of factors. I am

certain that the four factors did not receive equal weightage in the past and I do not think the words “especially strive” is particularly constraining.

Philosophically, as a classroom teacher, I do believe that diversity adds to pedagogy and research.

### **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?

I would prioritize renovation and repair and even replacement before taking on new capital projects. This is cautious and responsible approach that is both budget and environment-friendly. One of my goals is to rebalance capital and operating budgets to allow the hiring of new teachers, staff, and counselors.

Here are some back of the envelope calculations: We have a \$1.8 billion CIP. To fund it fully, we need to borrow \$1.2 billion. This means that we will add to annual debt repayment to the tune of \$100 million. If we can even save \$100 million in new borrowing, it will save \$8 million in debt repayment, which the salary of 100 teachers.

### **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?

I think universal screening has been an excellent tool to give smart kids who were previously unable to get to magnet programs to now get into the programs.

I would try to meet the needs of advanced students by vastly expanding content education instead of focusing exclusively on skill-development. Now, every teaching approach balances content and skill, but the testing regime has driven teaching toward increased skills-development at the cost of content education. In my experience, no one becomes a botanist because they like the scientific method. They do it because they love plants and along the way they realize that scientific method helps that develop that love. We teach elementary school children the scientific method without teaching them content. This approach helps not just advanced students but all students.

### **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?

The opportunity gap is relatively easy to measure. The OLO report from December shows, for example, that MCPS underfunds some compensatory education programs. Indeed, MCPS cut English-language learner funding between 2014 and 2018 just as the

population of these students increased dramatically. Similarly, the ERS report showed that some MCPS were being taught by novice teachers and tracked to lower level courses.

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

If we do not provide equal access, the public nature of public education is in jeopardy. We might get a good school but if the system fails then the county as a whole will suffer.

To close the opportunity gap, we have to look at all four pillars of a successful education system: resources, leadership, teachers, and home-school connection. The first three are widely talked about, so I will focus here on the fourth. The home and school partnership works for some parents but for most we do not know our children's teachers in any significant manner. Our primary interaction occurs at highly ritualized parent-teacher meetings. I want to explore the possibility of teachers going out to make home visits like they used to. But to do this we must reduce their workload in other matters. This is why hiring more teachers, staff, and counselors might be the best way to close the opportunity gap and allow students to excel.

### **11. Kirwan Commission**

Do you support the recommendations by the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education (Kirwan Commission) and why?

I support the Kirwan Commission's recommendations. I support expansion of pre-k programs. I support rethinking the teaching profession to make it more prestigious and well-respected. I support closing the opportunity and the performance gap. I support the idea of community schools. MCPS is pursuing this idea but I have not heard about changes in governance that commission has also recommended.

The reason I support Kirwan is because I believe strongly in the public character of public education. I believe public education is what makes Montgomery County a great place to live and bring up children and I want to preserve that.