

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: Paul Geller

Town or City of Residency: Olney

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison

Professional Background:

Full-time Volunteer Community Advocate for Montgomery County Public Schools, 2018-Present
Television Host/Interviewer of MCCPTA Presents on MCPS-TV, 2013-17
Local, Cluster, County, and State PTA Leader 2012-17
Writer/Researcher

Political Background:

President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA), 2016-17 (one countywide election)
Vice President of Programs of MCCPTA, 2013-16 (three annual countywide elections)
President of Belmont Elementary School PTSA, 2012-16 (twice elected)
Vice President of 6th and 7th Grades for the Rosa M. Parks Middle School PTA, 2014-16 (twice elected)
MCCPTA Delegate for Rosa M. Parks Middle School PTA, 2012-14 (twice elected)
Maryland PTA Membership Chair, 2015-6 (one statewide election)
At-Large Candidate for Montgomery County Council, 2017-8
Campaign Volunteer for Nancy Floreen for County Executive, 2018
Campaign Volunteer for Roger Berliner for County Executive, 2017-18

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: Paul Geller (Electronic signature) Date: January 31, 2020

Part 1

1. Why do you want to serve on BOE?

I want to serve on the Board of Education because:

I have the proven experience to get things done. Back in January 2016, Board of Education Member Philip Kauffman told me MCPS needed \$100,000,000 more for the Operating Budget (basically the budget for teacher, staff, and administrator salaries, along with other non-physical plant/construction expenses) than they were going to request. He insisted I was the only person who could make this happen. Having talked to many teachers, administrators, and students districtwide, I knew this was the case. We needed to hire additional teachers, along with offering new programs, such as one to make it more clearly defined for Paraeducators and other service oriented staff to have easier on ramps to becoming teachers. Then County Executive Isiah Leggett told me this was simply not possible because it would require a unanimous vote of the County Council. Undaunted, a colleague and I pursued this funding. In the end, we not only got the unanimous vote, we were able to help get \$89,000,000 more into MCPS every year from now on. And I played an instrumental role in enhancing the budget each year since then.

There is work that still needs to be done to improve the quality and rigor of education for all our students. Our students, be they high or low performers, need to be challenged by the course

material, and encouraged to excel by their teachers. There is simply too much testing...something I will full pledge to work to significantly reduce by advocating with fellow BOE members statewide and nationwide. Testing discourages some, and certainly consumes an inordinate amount of time compared to just a few decades ago.

I want to continue to make a big difference in the lives of our students. A few years ago, I was having a conversation with several student leaders. One mentioned the Student Leadership Coordinator position was going to be merged with another job and disappear. This job, created in the late 1960s, was designed to guide students in diplomatic and creative ways to institute needed changes in the system by providing student leaders with an adult organizer to help them better hone their advocacy skills. The students I was talking with, among the best advocates in MCPS, were resigned to the fact this was a fait accompli. I gave them my word I would change that. Within hours I personally contacted our Superintendent, Dr. Jack Smith, along with each individual member of the BOE to let them know what happened, and why we needed to restore this position. Within days the position was restored. I also was one of the only adults in the state of Maryland to testify with students to expand the voting rights of our wonderful Student Members of the Board. After years of students unsuccessfully advocating for these rights to vote on budgetary issues, the state passed this legislation. I helped the students prove their point, because I had seen many students come better prepared to meetings than most adults in the room. They earned my trust and respect, and I conveyed that to our elected officials in Annapolis.

As I have done for years now, I will invest my time and talent full-time to serving MCPS. Many other candidates have other full-time jobs. Serving as a member of the BOE will be what I do.

Since my children entered MCPS in 2008, I have been an active volunteer and advocate in the schools. I worked my way up by learning from the ground up all the challenges and triumphs that take place within our schools. It started out by being asked to volunteer in a Kindergarten class. Within a couple of years I was a volunteering full-time organizing a wildly successful Science Fair (at one point having nearly one-third of the students participating), three extra-curricular language programs (Chinese, Spanish, and French), and an arts program. I then switched gears and was eagerly recruited onto MCCPTA's eight member Executive Committee. All along the way I listened to what was needed in our schools. And, when the needs were small, I would offer advice for individuals on how to get what they needed. When needs were great I would mobilize several PTA members, or outside groups, to testify together around a common theme. Almost always, my efforts would involve advocating to members of our BOE. I grew to have a healthy respect and excellent working relationship with them. Now, I want to return the favor, and work with members of our community to make our school system even better by listening to them, questioning MCPS policies when necessary, and doing right by our students.

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

Based on my proven track record of success in advocacy for MCPS; long history of working with all members of the BOE, County Council, Montgomery County Delegation to the Maryland General Assembly, and numerous local officials from Poolesville to Takoma Park, Rockville to Gaithersburg, I will be ready from the start to provide a

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

First, improved educational rigor, along with less testing. We need to prepare our 21st century students for 21st century jobs and careers. We need to rethink how students are educated, and strive to make sure all students are engaged and healthfully challenged in their academic pursuits...be they in the sciences, high technology, trade professions, medical field, arts, theatre, music,... The goal should always be to create people who have a lifelong love of learning. In order to do this we need to significantly reduce the state and federally mandated testing that stresses out our students and staff, and clogs up the school calendar. In addition, we need to make a technological transformation of our classrooms. As one of the key individuals who led the successful charge to get funding for computers

and WiFi in all our schools back in 2012, and pushed MCPS to adopt a technology purchase plan for years afterward, we need to prepare our kids for the future.

Second, we must cut through the endless backlog of school construction and renovation projects, and “green” our schools at the same time. I have been the leading advocate for MCPS to start renovating or “refreshing” our schools, and adding solar panels where practical. When I started heavily advocating a few years ago for schools to be “refreshed” in the same manner as our award winning Montgomery County Public Libraries, I was pulled aside by one of the construction leaders at MCPS and given their version of things. Between being told by this individual that we do not do school renovations because of problems encountered in the 1980s and 1990s (something that is likely MCPS’s fault since inspections failed to notice these problems), and that this person did not have enough time to review more contracts (at a potential huge savings for us taxpayers, I sprung into action. I advocated directly to the Board of Education and County Council for funding specifically for new hires to review these additional contracts. Right now, it will take more than 76 years to renovate all our middle schools alone. And project after project is delayed, sometimes by many years. We need speedy relief for repairing and upgrading our buildings. First and foremost, this will involve inviting experts in the field of school renovations into MCPS, assessing our existing buildings, and getting estimates for how much it will cost to renovate existing buildings rather than razing and rebuilding them.

Third, school choice. Having fielded endless comments about how overcrowded some schools are, and frequently being one of the only people to consistently and successfully advocate for school construction funding, we need to rethink everything. And the most basic, painless way to do this is through school choice. We should allow a student attending a school at 105% or greater of capacity to attend another school at 95% or less of capacity in close proximity to their own, to attend that other school. This would involve zero school boundary changes. It would simply be a matter of choice. A student can remain in the catchment area for the school they are assigned to, or attending a less crowded school. Whoever possible, transportation would be arranged for elementary and middle school students. High schoolers would be encouraged to take the Ride On Bus, we could work with the County Council to expand Ride On Bus service if needed as well. The bottom line is unless we either get a significant increase in Capital Improvements Program (CIP) revenue, the part of the budget allocated to construction, or boundary lines change (something I do not want), we need a creative solution. School choice is it.

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?

Being on the BOE is a multi-faceted task. You need to both listen to the current needs of MCPS, and follow the established policies of MCPS (which are updated in an ongoing basis). One issue we need to address is the BOE has conflicting policies. Policies regarding program placement and school boundary considerations conflict with each other. These policies need to be re-examined and updates. I am also concerned about the unintended consequences of making new policy or modifying old policy. Would improve the process by suggesting the formation of specific policy area workgroups composed of MCPS and community members working together to analyze the situation, and coming to consensus about needed changes.

5. Operating Budget

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

One of the main issues is how we are going to fund all the requests MCPS is making of the County Council in a tight fiscal year. In short, I think we are adding too many new initiatives, as we have done in the past few years, and not enough of what we continuously hear from educators and the community that we need. First and foremost, we need to hire more Counselors and School

Psychologists. This is a universal issue across our elementary schools in particular. We also need more pre-Kindergarten spaces. Every child should be able to attend school as a three or four year old. I have personally seen the difference academically in kids who have participated in nursery school programs for those aged 2-5. It is amazing. The low pressure program my kids participated in provided them with a solid basis for success in MCPS. The kids learn what it is like to be in a classroom, are given the tools to settle differences by communicating, and most of all, are given the opportunity to learn through exploration – art, music, play, songs, games. It is something I would like more of our kids to experience. That said, it is very costly to provide this expanded program. That is why, for many years now, I have been a relentless advocate for enhanced casino revenues going to our schools. We were promised in two different statewide ballot initiatives the lion's share of this money would go to public education. In point of fact, table game revenue provides casino owners with an 80% windfall, while our public schools get a paltry 20%. Thus, we have to pursue legislation in Annapolis to change this. Finally, we also have the issue of funding Kirwan. Asking our County Council to exceed Maintenance of Effort (MOE) this year again, is not advisable.

6. Curriculum

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

I think intellectual stimulation is always important. And while offering as challenging a curriculum as possible has advantages and could play an important role in education, we need to be ever mindful that we are constantly seeing students dealing with stress, depression, and other manifestations of being driven too hard to succeed. So, how do we accomplish both goals? One way is to reduce the state and federal testing, as mentioned above. This will require BOE consensus, as well as advocacy at the state and federal level – something I am a seasoned veteran at doing. It would be my goal to work with my colleagues across the state and nation to curb the quantity of tests. Teachers know our students best. Let our teachers teach. Another way to do this is by offering more intellectually rigorous courses in ALL our schools. Last year, at the urging of many, including myself, MCPS rolled out more challenging middle school courses. From the folks I have spoken with districtwide at all levels, these programs have been well received and a success. We need more of them. We also have a strong need for language offerings for all in kindergarten through twelfth grades. And science and technology should be more readily available to all.

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?

The entire school boundary question can be resolved with school choice. The boundaries would remain the same. As stated above, we should allow a student attending a school at 105% or greater of capacity to attend another school at 95% or less of capacity in close proximity to their own, to attend that other school. This would involve zero school boundary changes. It would simply be a matter of choice. A student can remain in the catchment area for the school they are assigned to, or attending a less crowded school. Whoever possible, transportation would be arranged for elementary and middle school students. High schoolers would be encouraged to take the Ride On Bus, we could work with the County Council to expand Ride On Bus service if needed as well. The bottom line is unless we either get a significant increase in Capital Improvements Program (CIP) revenue, the part of the budget allocated to construction, or boundary lines change (something I do not want), we need a creative solution. School choice is it.

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?

School renovation, as mentioned above, should be an MCPS priority...something they almost totally will not consider today. Buildings are renovated each and every day nationwide such as the Empire State Building, the National Building Museum, and countless others...including many schools. The solution is simple. We need to invite qualified and capable contractors and companies to exam our current buildings, and report back as to whether each can be renovated (and how much it will cost), or needs t be torn down and rebuilt. Based on several people I have spoken with, MCPS has shut out school renovation companies from outside our county from doing this basic task. We need to have folks outside of MCPS assess our buildings for renovations. And if a building needs to be rebuilt, fine. We also must upgrade all buildings to add solar panels whenever practical. Solar panels often pay for themselves in less than ten years, yet keep generating power for at least another decade. And we need to purchase them outright. The lease agreements are just not in our best interest. As for which schools would get projects first, it would be based on need. The Key Facility Indicators we now use, must be honed to provide better accuracy. They also need to take into account the number of students in the building. If a building is significantly over capacity, that should be taken into account when ranking the need for renovations or a rebuild.

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?

The biggest improvement in GT programs is their spread into more middle and elementary schools. Soon to be gone are the long commutes students had to make just to attend a specific school designated for GT programs. And while these locally based advanced programs are good, they only cover a few subjects per grade. Also concentration of poverty has an effect on all students in a school. Would especially want to make sure to support GT students in these schools.

As far as initiatives are concerned, I would want the input of both the office of Accelerate and Enriched Instruction, and the families involved in the program – past, present, and future. Having stakeholder input in making suggested changes both sides can agree on is the key to establishing a great GT program moving forward.

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?

As a proud member of the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence, I strongly support these very reasonable asks. Sadly, the Opportunity Gap exists because of bias. As a former PTA leader, and now Community Advocate, I sadly hear it all the time. One group is unhappy with another. One school gets more than another. You name the permutation of argument, and I have likely heard it. The bottom line is we need everyone in the MCPS family – students, teachers, administrators, staff, families, and community to treat each and every individual as a unique person. As far as metrics are concerned, the numbers presented by the Coalition speak volumes. And while no large scale school system in the nation has been able to successfully eliminate the achievement gap, the hearts of MCPS staff are in the right place.

To close the Achievement Gap we must explain the harm of bias/racism to all by better utilizing MCPS-TV to feature special programming sharing the stories of our students and their experiences in school. Having heard stories of what some of our students have gone through, it makes me want to redouble my efforts to share their stories anonymously with others. We need to stop being prejudice. Period. And MCPS cannot do this alone. We need the community to help, as well as our families themselves. Together, we can make a difference.

11. Kirwan Commission

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

Having testified three times at Kirwan Commission hearings, and having attended several of their meetings, I wanted to make sure the voice of the teacher was heard. For me, it is the basics of the Commission's report that matter most. We need to make pre-Kindergarten available for all students. The costs of trying to catch students up at a later date are simply too great. We need more Special Education Teachers. We must better recognize the profession of teachers as the professionals that they are. They deserve more autonomy, and less testing. We need to do something to supercharge our school system. The best way to do this statewide is through the Kirwan Commission recommendations.