

Common Questionnaire for candidates in Howard County Board of Education Election 2020

Background

This is a common questionnaire (CommonQ) that is being proposed to Howard County endorsement entities to use to reduce the time candidates have to spend completing endorsement work. This is not indicative of any type of coalition of participating entities, as it is solely an administrative endeavor to assist candidates. Each entity that ends up participating in the use of this common questionnaire (CommonQ) could possibly publicize the answers. Each entity will contact candidates separately regarding their own supplemental questionnaires and due dates. **CURRENT COMMONQ due date is Saturday, Feb. 15th.**

Requests to participate in the CommonQ were sent to Howard County endorsement entities. The following entities are currently participating.

- Chinese American Political Association PAC (POC Hongling Zhou)
- Howard County Families for Education Improvement (POC Vipin Sahijwani)
- Howard County Neighbors United (POC Steve Keller)
- Indian Origin Network of Howard County (IONHoCo) (POC Pravin Ponnuri)
- Scott E's Blog (POC Scott Ewart)
- The People's Voice Ethics Ballot (POC Lisa Markovitz)
- HoCo Kids (POC Jen Nussbaum)

Instructions

Attached is the current CommonQ. Please restrict your answers to the length of the forms provided. You can add supplemental information at the end if you feel it is necessary.

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Individual Information

Name/District	Sezin Palmer / D4
Campaign Address/Phone/Email	6416 Autumn Sky Way, Columbia, MD 21044 410-465-2932 / sezin@sezin4boe.org
Social Media Accounts	www.sezin4boe.org, www.facebook.com/sezin4boe
Education History	BSEE UMCP, MSEE JHU
Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience	Turkish (fluent), Executive leader in STEM field / organizational leadership

Community Interest / Position Questions

1. Why are you running? (1,200 characters)

I am a parent, a tax-payer and a life-long citizen of Howard County. I have been compelled to run for the BOE because I see a broken system that must be fixed, and I am confident I can help to improve it. I will bring integrity, transparency and rigor in decision-making to the Board of Education. We need board members who are proven leaders, capable of running large organizations. First and foremost, we need to better understand the root cause of many of the issues we are facing across HCPSS; we cannot continue making decisions based on emotion and funding programs that sound good without evidence of enhancing student educational outcomes. We must request – and listen to – community input. We must be respectful and caring of our community’s views and feelings about the most important aspects of their lives: their children. I am running to restore confidence in all Howard County stakeholders: for parents to know that their children will get an excellent education; for students to feel secure in their communities and familiar surroundings; and for tax-payers to know that their hard-earned dollars are being used to ensure HCPSS remains at the forefront of educational achievement.

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2. Explain why you are qualified to hold this position. (1,200 characters)

I bring a new and different skillset to the BOE – one that has been sorely lacking and one that will add significant value. In addition to being a lifelong resident, a product of the HCPSS and the mother of two children currently in HCPSS, I am a professional with over 20 years of leadership experience. As an executive in an organization with an annual budget over \$1.5 billion, I have extensive experience aligning budgets to organizational goals. Working effectively across groups with competing priorities and across all levels of leadership is also a critical skill that is needed on the BOE. I will focus on bringing the community together to arrive at mutually beneficial solutions. Believing in servant leadership, I will empower the citizens of Howard County and ensure their voices are heard when it comes to the educational well-being of their children. In addition to my leadership strengths, I am a woman in a STEM field and am passionate about ensuring our children are prepared for life in a technology-driven world. I earned BS/MS degrees in electrical engineering from UMCP/JHU, and I believe more technical leaders on the BOE can better prepare our children for the future.

3. Have you ever testified before County or State Boards or done public volunteer work? (1,200 characters)

I have testified before the Howard County Board of Education on issues related to redistricting and budgetary issues. I have testified at the State and Federal level on other matters related to my profession. I have volunteered extensively on PTAs and Boosters, including serving in several leadership roles on the PTA during my children's elementary school years. I am passionate about public service and have also supported and engaged with numerous local charitable organizations including: Generosity Global, a Baltimore-based charity founded by a graduate of Howard High School that focuses on bringing clean water to villages in Africa and on helping the homeless population of Baltimore City; St. Vincent DePaul, a Baltimore-based charity focused on providing summer programs and camps to disadvantaged Baltimore City children; Donors Choose, a local charity providing needed materials and supplies to Howard County classrooms; and many other local and national charitable organizations focused on children.

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4. With regard to school redistricting, what do you believe are the three top priorities, in order, that should be considered as reasons to redistrict, or goals of redistricting? How would you suggest those goals be met? (1,500 characters)

I believe that the only reason redistricting should occur is to address capacity issues across HCPSS, and even then, the minimum number of moves should be made in order to relieve capacity challenges. Redistricting is a highly disruptive event that is traumatic for children, families and communities and should not be used as a common approach to address various problems. Studies show that stability is one of the most important factors impacting children's mental health and well-being and as leaders, we must not take actions that have the potential to harm students. It should be the option of last resort when other choices cannot address the issue. If redistricting is absolutely necessary, the top three goals I would focus on include: 1) minimizing the number of moves to address capacity issues; 2) ensuring the redistricting approach taken will address future projected capacity so as to minimize the need for additional redistricting; and 3) balancing diversity and socioeconomic status across impacted schools. However, I would not advocate for making more moves than capacity challenges warrant in order to address diversity and socioeconomic status; I think there are better approaches HCPSS can take to address these challenges and redistricting alone is not the optimal approach to doing so.

5. Do you believe that residents should be able to rely on students attending their neighborhood schools? Why or why not? (1,500 characters)

Yes. I believe in community schools and keeping neighborhoods together. When schools reach their capacity limits and redistricting becomes necessary, communities and neighborhoods should not be divided. Children thrive in environments with stability and support, as evidenced by numerous studies – this is a key tenet that the Board of Education (BOE) should seek to uphold for the well being of our children and families. I would like to see a true feeder system considered by the BOE and, to the extent possible, to ensure children remain with their neighbors and friends throughout their education in HCPSS. Howard County residents with school-aged children carefully consider the neighborhoods they want to live in and schools they want their children to attend, and it is wrong to take away this right. Parents fundamentally want to have a choice in their children's future and relying on neighborhood schools should absolutely be something parents can count on.

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6. How do you feel the HCPSS should deal with overcapacity school issues? (1,200 characters)

HCPSS must work to effectively communicate the needs of the school system to County and State officials. A vision and strategy that includes school construction and renovation needs must be presented along with the impact if additional capacity is not provided. To date, the communications from HCPSS leadership has been muddled and lacking in reliable data. We must clearly articulate the shortages in facilities and develop a strategic plan that remedies the situation over the coming years. Focusing solely on the immediate challenge without an eye toward the future will not solve the problem; it will simply delay the inevitable. The BOE must also work closely with the County Council to ensure developers are properly investing in infrastructure before building new residential housing that will only exacerbate the overcapacity issues. Due to insufficient infrastructure development over the past several years, HCPSS is now in a dire situation; however, we must focus on building a solution from this point forward. This will require leaders across the County and State to work together to ensure we can put HCPSS back on track to continue as a national leader in public education.

7. Do you believe developers should contribute more to fund schools? Do you believe developers should have to wait longer to build in overcapacity areas? How do you suggest the County Council and Board of Education work together to address overcapacity issues? (1,500 characters)

Yes and yes. Developers should not be permitted to build residential housing units until the proper infrastructure is in place to support the needs of those communities. As long as schools remain overcapacity, developers should not be authorized to build additional residential housing. The BOE and County Council members must come together and develop a joint strategy for alleviating the overcrowding issues across HCPSS. This includes a strategy for building new schools, renovating existing schools as appropriate, and slowing development until school capacity is available.

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8. What does equitable provision of education by the HCPSS, mean to you? How do you suggest that be implemented? (1,500 characters)

Equity, defined as the quality of being fair and impartial, is one of my core values. I absolutely believe that equity is an imperative that must be demanded of our government. When disparities exist in educational outcomes between various groups, we must dig into the problem to understand the fundamental reasons why; this was not done by the current Superintendent or the BOE. Rather, the assumption was made that redistribution of children across HCPSS would alleviate the problem. However, we are now seeing the children who will be most negatively impacted by these moves are the disadvantaged students we should be helping. The redistricting process has failed the students it was intended to help. All children deserve to receive an excellent education in HCPSS, and our leaders must more thoughtfully consider various solutions before executing flawed decision-making that negatively impacts students. I will focus on fairness for all children in the HCPSS, not for just a few. This includes the full spectrum of capabilities from special needs to gifted and talented programs and all socioeconomic levels. I would achieve this by more thoroughly examining the root causes of educational disparities and the range of potential solutions. Solutions that include more targeted support in the form of tutoring, additional resources in the classroom and after school and summer programs are likely to be more effective in truly improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students.

9. What do you believe Board of Education Members can do to achieve the highest level of achievement for all? Please include in your answer what you believe should be done to close any achievement gaps, be specific. Please also include in your answer, applicable related positions on homework and GT programs. (1,500 characters)

There are opportunity gaps for disadvantaged students, and the BOE should examine programs within its control that could close them. I would address the allocation of Title I funding in HCPSS and would recommend reconsidering the school-wide allocation model in favor of a targeted assistance model. These funds are meant to be used for disadvantaged students, and I would advocate for students to receive the additional support they need through use of these funds. This may include tutoring, additional instructional support or other targeted benefits. There are many problems within HCPSS that must be addressed in conjunction with discussing homework policies. Larger class sizes have resulted in teachers having less time to instruct students during class. Students need time to absorb and practice material they are being taught. Ideally, this would occur during the school day and homework would be minimal; however, because students do not get sufficient instructional support during the school day, I believe eliminating homework would be a disservice to students' education. The GT program is an essential component of providing all students the resources they need to achieve their full potential. I would strongly support continued and fully funded GT programs across HCPSS to continue challenging students who achieve at those levels. No child can be sacrificed in the name of equity and our country cannot afford to abandon our most gifted children.

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10. Do you believe the Board of Education race should remain non-partisan on the ballot? If so, how is your campaign remaining non-partisan? (1,200 characters)

Yes, I believe the BOE should remain focused on what is best for students in HCPSS versus catering to political parties and introducing political issues into local education. Sadly, it seems much of our BOE has already been politicized despite being non-partisan. Rather than giving into this trend, I would like to end it with the election of new BOE members who do not cater to politicians. My campaign is remaining non-partisan by equally accepting or rejecting offers for candidate forum involvement and questionnaire responses from both major political parties as well as taking independent views on all issues that pertain to HCPSS and BOE matters. Our campaign team is comprised of both Democrats and Republicans and we refuse to engage in politicking in our campaign. I am neither a Democrat nor a Republican because I choose to remain independent in my thinking and values, and I will not be swayed by political promises or rhetoric.

11. If elected, what are the top three goals you would want to work upon in your first year in office? (1,200 characters)

My top goal would be to revamp the process the BOE currently uses to make decisions. I would advocate for a more strategic approach to prioritizing the problems that need to be addressed across HCPSS and lay out a realistic plan and timeline to address them. This would include a thorough examination of the problems, independent analysis of potential solutions based on reliable data, community feedback on potential solutions, and thoughtful decision-making with sufficient time to arrive at responsible solutions. The BOE is currently in constant fire-fighting mode, where decisions are rushed and due diligence is not exercised in considering potential solutions and examining their consequences. My second goal would be to develop a strategic plan for getting HCPSS back on course and providing the necessary educational support to all students within the allocated budget. HCPSS spends over \$15K per student per year, yet is proposing cuts to fundamental educational needs. Special education programs are in dire need of attention and we cannot continue allowing children and educators to suffer. My third goal would be to develop a better approach for community engagement with the BOE.

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12. Do you believe the Superintendent's requested budget is too high, too low or just right? If too low, how much should it be, and what other county budget items should be cut to fund it? If too high what should be cut from the request? (1,200 characters)

I think the Superintendent's proposed budget for FY21 was too high. It did not demonstrate any prioritization of necessary educational funding over new initiatives that do not correspond to educational outcomes. The Superintendent asked for funding outside the realm of reality and simply set up the BOE to make cuts as they see fit. The Superintendent and the BOE should clearly articulate the most important areas of focus based on educational outcomes for all children and allocate funding accordingly. A thorough examination of all positions and costs that are not directly tied to educators and educational outcomes would be areas that I would prioritize for scrutiny to ensure only the most critical positions are funded. The result likely would have been lower than what the Superintendent proposed but, by definition, would not cut the most important programs that directly support all students' educational outcomes.

13. What is your position on each of the current local Howard County State bills?(1,500 characters)

1-20: I absolutely OPPOSE this bill. The BOE should remain responsible for making the determination as to whether redistricting is necessary. Annual redistricting is much too disruptive and harmful to community, family and student stability; 2-20: SUPPORT; 4-20: OPPOSE. I think this is a reasonable requirement to consider, however, I am concerned that this disempowers the citizens of Howard County when it comes to speaking out against unwarranted redistricting. ; 6-20: OPPOSE. This bill does not make it clear what new information would be contained in this reporting and how it would be used differently than reporting that is already required ;13-20: SUPPORT WITH MODIFICATIONS to change the frequency with which school capacity is calculated to 3 years; 19-20: SUPPORT; 22-20: OPPOSE. While I fully support getting special interests out of the BOE, Howard County tax-payers should not be required to foot the bill for BOE or any other elected members of government; 23-20:OPPOSE. This requirement is redundant with data already collected and reported; 26-20: I SUPPORT increased revenue allocated to new school construction and would support an amendment to increase the fraction from 25% to at least 50% as proposed by the legislative committee.

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14. Do you feel class sizes are too high or too low? Why? (1,200 characters)

Class sizes have been increasing year after year across HCPSS. As the BOE looks for areas to cut, continuing to increase class sizes is not the right answer. Students already suffer due to insufficient instructional time and attention from teachers. As we continue increasing class sizes, this will only exacerbate the problem. In addition, the number of students with special needs continues to grow and we need to ensure classes are balanced in numbers of students with IEPs. High student to teacher ratios compounded by high numbers of students with special needs results in significant negative consequences for all children in the classroom. We need to properly fund HCPSS to ensure that class sizes return to manageable levels and are supported with sufficient educators and resources. Studies have shown that smaller class sizes, particularly at younger ages and for minority and disadvantaged students, is highly correlated to improved educational outcomes. As we continue to discuss closing the opportunity gap for disadvantaged students, increasing class size is moving us in the opposite direction.

15. How should performance be measured, of students, of teachers? (1,200 characters)

Performance of students should partially be measured traditionally based on testing which reflects the extent to which they have absorbed and learned the classroom materials. (That said, I would advocate for revisiting HCPSS curriculum and Common Core in particular.) Teachers and HCPSS should be measured based on the performance and wellbeing of their students. This includes traditional measures such as test scores and grades, but I would advocate for metrics that reflect the environment in the classroom, whether teachers and administration are viewed as supportive or combative with students and families, and how parents assess the performance of teachers and administration. In most industries, there are mechanisms for providing feedback regarding supervisors, and I think student and parent feedback should be taken into consideration in assessing HCPSS performance.

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16. What do you believe should be done to attempt to improve physical safety in schools?
(1,200 characters)

Physical security in our schools is a complex challenge. Student safety is of the utmost importance, yet we do not want students to feel as though they are entering a prison when entering their schools. I would advocate for non-intrusive and less visible means of providing physical security in schools. New technologies allow for improving situational awareness while minimizing direct impact on individuals. I would recommend continued engagement with experts in physical security and would solicit proposals for approaches to evolve school safety while minimizing impact on students.

17. How would you as a Board Member oversee your only employee and review and instruct the Superintendent? Are you pleased with the current Superintendent? Would you vote to renew his contract? Why or why not? (1,200 characters)

I would oversee our only employee in a similar way that I currently oversee all my employees: clear articulation of expectations, measurable objectives, and continuous performance assessment relative to those expectations and objectives. I would focus these expectations and objectives on the Superintendent's ability to provide leadership across HCPSS that improves educational outcomes and student wellbeing. This includes objective educational scores as well as subjective input regarding student and parent satisfaction. I am not pleased with the current Superintendent because I do not believe he has demonstrated the ability to successfully lead HCPSS in a way that inspires confidence in him. He developed a redistricting plan that was highly controversial, disruptive and ignored community input. Furthermore, he has not demonstrated an ability to address ongoing concerns with special needs, bullying and other challenges across HCPSS. For these reasons, I would not vote to renew his contract based on his performance to date. Under new BOE leadership, I would be open to giving him the opportunity to demonstrate whether he is capable of leading HCPSS moving forward.

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18. Do you believe the HCPSS is serving the needs of the Special Education community? If not, what needs to be changed? (1,200 characters)

No. Our special needs programs in HCPSS are in dire need of attention and are at a breaking point. The BOE must dig into the details of the challenges parents and teachers face and address these serious problems. Parents should not have to hire advocates and attorneys to ensure their children receive the support they need. Additional special education positions are certainly needed; however, transparency, accountability and policy changes are also in order. Staff training is essential for effective special needs education and we must ensure adequate training of special educators who are interacting with our children. There must be more accountability for the school administration when children's needs are not being met; widespread non-compliance with 504s and IEPs cannot be allowed to continue. We have greatly varying experiences with special needs across schools and educators – we must ensure more consistency across our schools, so that all schools are aligned with the expectation that every child is enabled to reach their full potential.

Currently administered by Lisa Markovitz. By Authority, The People's Voice, Lisa Markovitz Treasurer