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8815 Centre Park Drive, Suite 245, Columbia, MD 21045

ETHICS BALLOT QUESTIONNAIRE

Howard County Board of Education – 2026 primary

Name:

Mark Covington

Campaign Address/Phone/Email:

6752 Springing Step Columbia MD 21044

4432554420

CovingtonforBoE@gmail.com

Educational History:

BS in School Health with a minor in Psychology-Towson State University 1986

MEd in School Administration-Bowie State University-1994

Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience:

A parent of two HCPSS graduates, 2006 and 2009.

Public School Educator from 1986-2017.

Served in the roles of teacher and school-based administrator.

Principal from 2011-2017.

Professor at Loyola University of Maryland from 2019-2024.

Certified in Leadership Coaching 2010

Representative from Prince George's County Public Schools to work with The Wallace Foundation 2012-2016, with a focus on enhancing leadership skills within our public schools.

Member of the Hickory Ridge Village Board from 2025-present.

Vice-Chair on the Community Advisory Council (CAC) 2025-present

Member of the Operating Budget Review Committee (OBRC)-2025-present

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1. Describe why your campaign is viable and what makes you uniquely qualified to serve on the Board of Education.

My run for the Board of Education is a reflection of why I chose education as my career. I believe that every social challenge we face can be mitigated by a robust and equitable educational system. Seeking the at-large seat on the Howard County Board of Education is simply a continuation of my lifelong efforts to ensure that every student has the ability to decide their own future in an accepting and respectful world. As an educator, I have lived through the challenges associated with navigating the vagaries of our public schools. When state testing protocols shifted, I developed and implemented new High School Assessment testing protocols and spearheaded a collaborative Co-Pilot program to ensure students and staff were supported through the transition. When new teachers needed a support system in their classrooms, I built mentorship programs, served as a mentor principal, and developed the Professional Growth Experience at Loyola University to support educator certification and professional development. And when at-risk students faced suspension, I designed and led middle and high school community outreach suspension and reduction programs that gave students a path back into the classroom rather than out of it. I believe my career experience provides me with the perspective to remove the obstacles that interfere with the effective functioning of our schools. I have also partnered with our schools as a community member, serving as Vice Chair of the Board of Education's Community Advisory Council. If I am fortunate enough to win the seat, I will be a relentless ally to all who are singularly focused on the holistic success of every student.

2. Are you participating in the Citizens Election Fund (CEF) public financing? Why or why not?
No. Candidates for the Board of Education are not permitted to use CEF funding.

3. What do you believe are the three most important issues currently facing the HCPSS? What are your plans to address these?

Increasing the revenue to the HCPSS is the most critical issue facing our community. Four straight years of cutting personnel and programs is an indicator of fiscal need, not fiscal malfeasance. This is especially poignant when one realizes that HCPSS has the smallest central office staff, relative to student population, of any similarly sized district in the state. As a member of the Operating Budget Review Committee (OBRC), I have heard officials from the budgeting office state that there is no way

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for our system to cut its way to a balanced budget. During COVID, many civic leaders joined the chorus of educators who warned of a decrease in educational effectiveness due to cuts made to balance the county budget. The federal influx of funds during COVID obscured this fact but did not solve our long-term problems. If we are to retain our success as a highly effective school system, we must fully fund all programs and properly compensate our teachers. I understand that members of the Board of Education manage the money they are allotted and do not control the size of that allotment. This fact will not deter me from advocating for the resources that our schools need from county officials. I have also worked with various community groups to empower parents to take this message to county officials. Our presentations are a combination of reviewing the budgeting process as well as the best approach to advocate for full and reasonable funding.

Second, teacher retention and compensation is the surest way for HCPSS to remain the uniquely successful system it is. Educational Researcher Dr. Brad Johnson is known for his belief that a teacher shortage does not exist. He postulates that we have a shortage of educators who are willing to accept the compensation and working conditions that teachers endure. Although there is room to debate his perspective, there is no doubt that there is much truth to be learned from it. There are many initiatives to address the loss of educators from the profession which I address below in Question 9.

Third, I will prioritize our Special Education programs, robust mental health systems for our students, and the need for equitable distribution of resources. My thoughts on Special Education are detailed later on this questionnaire. Increasing the mental health capacity of our schools and equitable distribution of resources are related topics. The common thread is providing every school and student with prescribed resources. We should empower school staff to inform the conversation and then make requests of Central Office because mental health needs vary from student to student and from school to school.

4. The Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) Review Committee, posted recommendations for changes to APFO in August of 2025. One of the suggested changes was the elimination of the temporary postponement of development projects in crowded school districts (for up to 4 years). Instead of the pauses, surcharge fee increases based on overcapacity amounts were proposed. Do you agree with replacing the pauses with larger fees? If so, do you believe the larger fees proposed are the right amount?

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While I'm running for the Board of Education, one of the reasons I initially wanted to run for office was because of the severe housing crisis we are experiencing in Howard County. Much of this crisis is due to the simple fact that we have, for the most part, stopped building new housing in Howard County, causing prices to skyrocket. I am running on inclusion, and that means not only ensuring that no students feel excluded in our schools and classrooms, but also that our county is not exclusive to all but the wealthiest. Many of our educators and staff are commuting from outside of Howard County, all those who want to live here should be able to.

I am also running on fully funding our schools, and among the best ways we have to do this is by expanding our tax base. Howard County is among the fastest growing counties in our state—let's take advantage of this fact rather than turning people away with high housing prices. We must reform APFO so that we can build new housing and infrastructure, including schools, in tandem, rather than restricting our growth based on existing infrastructure. This is the best method we have for ensuring we maintain both our county's vibrancy and our world-class school system.

5. What do you believe are the top financial priorities in the HCPSS budget, given so many competing needs for resources?

If forced to make cuts, what areas do you think should be prioritized to not cut? Every position and program is important in the schoolhouse. If the County Council and County Executive are unwilling to fully fund our schools and provide the required resources, then protecting positions that interface directly with the students must remain paramount. Teachers, counselors, and all who support the effective functioning of the school should all be protected.

6. Howard County is not immune from the religious and ethnic division that has become a main concern across the country. Provide specifics for what you have done to bring people together. I selected education as my career with the idea that I was going to help build a more just and welcoming world. Like most educators, I spent my career working to bring young people and the community together through instruction and positive relationship building. As a teacher, I sponsored clubs and organizations created to overcome biases and bring different cultures together, such as Class Sponsor and Laurel HS Onyx Club. As an administrator, I prioritized celebrating and acknowledging all cultural events during the announcements to send a clear message that all religions and cultures were welcome in our schoolhouse. I adorned the walls of our halls and cafeteria with the flags (84)

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representing every student in the building. While at Samuel Ogle Middle School, I started Family Fun Day; a school fair that welcomed the entire school community to a day of unity. As a Professor in the School of Education at Loyola University, I encouraged my teacher candidates to take the Harvard Implicit Bias survey and use introspection to inform their interactions with students and communities.

7. Give three examples of HCPSS issues you have supported or opposed. Have you testified before the Board of Education in the past?

As a representative of the Operating Budget Review Committee (OBRC), I presented recommendations to the Board of Education on retaining the Para-educators for the Science Departments.

I have always worked to promote relations between HCPSS and HCEA as they strive to provide fair compensation to our staff and ensure high levels of academic success. Collective bargaining and due process are huge benefits to system employees and the county at-large. It is an absolute if we are to keep our current level of success.

I have also opposed taking away religious holidays to make up for snow days, and I have fully supported the system's efforts to provide mental health capacity to all of our schools.

8. How do you believe schools should be prioritized for capital improvement funding? What types of criteria do you believe are fair? How should the HCPSS handle the lack of resources available to keep all schools maintained?

The physical health of students and staff has to be the number one priority when considering deferred maintenance. Fortunately, the majority of buildings in our system are structurally sound. Buildings with faulty wiring or other fire/safety issues should be placed high on the list. Unfortunately, there are documented reports of buildings which contain mold and other related health hazards. Outdated plumbing, roofing and HVAC are the primary reasons behind such biological hazards. The costliest capital improvement involves aging HVAC systems in any number of our schools. Additionally, it is imperative that we ensure our schools are secure. The Board of Education has the responsibility of ensuring that our buildings can physically keep intruders out.

As with the operating budget, the Board of Education has little control over the amount of capital improvement funds. Whenever there are fiscal inefficiencies, the Board of Education must be

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especially fair, consistent and just in its prioritization. Board members have referred to the process as choosing the 'least bad choice' in such situations. Adopting an objective set of metrics is the key to keeping our fleet of schools in top condition, while also meeting the expectations of our communities. There have been many questions regarding the most recent index used by HCPSS to prioritize projects. Something that has been overlooked by many is the fact that the adopters of the index clearly stated its limitations before it was applied. HCPSS and the Board of Education, must remain transparent with the process to avoid accusations of favoritism. Further, such transparency helps to reassure our parents that choices are made for the benefit of all of our students.

9. What can the HCPSS do to compete with other school systems to obtain experienced teachers and staff?

HCPSS must increase funding to the school system and ensure that our compensation package is competitive with our neighboring districts. We should begin by reviewing the pay scale. Our starting pay is very competitive, but there is less financial motivation for teachers to stay as they gain experience. If our pay steps do not mirror that of other systems, staff will leave just as they are reaching their most effective levels in the classroom. An experienced teacher, who was trained in one of the state's premier systems, can find a position in any other local system based on Howard County's reputation. I know, because I have written many letters of reference for such teachers.

We must also make it a system priority to review all memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with our local universities. Every teacher recruitment member of HR should have contacts within Schools of Education in the University System of Maryland. This approach is used in the fields of business, law, finance and others. If the candidate pool is shrinking, we must work harder to attract more teachers.

Retaining teachers is the most effective way to avoid our staffing shortage. Further, retaining teachers is the best way to ensure effective instruction in our classrooms. Providing mentors to all first and second year teachers will go a long way to stop the feelings of abandonment and burnout felt by many young teachers. It is no secret as to why teachers are leaving the profession. A combination of poor compensation, lack of support, flip flopping policies, policies designed without staff input and being asked to wear too many hats has led to this exodus. These are all within our control to improve.

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10. How would you improve support of Special Education programs?

The challenges facing special education programs are not new. There are ways to address this crisis, and they all involve leveraging the experience and know-how of the people who work these programs every day.

- a. Fill all SpEd vacancies including Paraeducator positions.
- b. Create a strategy to address potential fiscal shortfalls that occur due to cuts from the Department of Education.
- c. Avoid the current top down trap and provide more autonomy to SpEd teachers and Principals to develop their own prescriptive actions.
- d. Special Education teachers spend a large amount of time completing non-instructional tasks (paperwork, IEP meetings etc). Their schedules should reflect this reality through increased planning periods or reduced caseloads.
- e. Incentivize Gen Ed teachers to become SpEd certified. This is a win/win since SpEd instruction is just good pedagogy.
- f. Develop a plan to reopen regional centers in the county. If done properly, these centers would not only work with HCPSS students but could also act as a model, bringing in students from other school systems as well.
- g. Include SpEd in the Howard County educational vision. Howard County has proven itself to be a highly effective system, but often manifests itself with a greater focus on the highest achieving students. If we are to truly meet the needs of all of our students, we must expand that focus without lowering expectations. We must value the education of all of our students.
- h. Continue providing training for all staff on meeting the needs of identified students.

An important step is to structure conversations and develop work groups with our current Special Education teachers. They know what their greatest needs are and can articulate those needs better than anyone outside of the school building. Further, they can help us identify ways to better retain other like-minded teachers. In short, ask the teachers what obstacles they need removed from their path so that they can better service our children.

11. The HCPSS budget has ever-increasing needs, and over time has not been fully funded. What ideas do you have to help improve student outcomes given the limited resources directly available to support student needs?

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As a community, we must shift the paradigm surrounding school funding. It is common knowledge that our schools have been historically underfunded. "Do more with less" is a phrase most educators are familiar with as they watch their funding and resources shrink. Unfortunately, we have seen the negative impacts of this philosophy, especially when discussing teacher retention and reductions in cherished programs. Our willingness to balance our local budget by sacrificing our educational system is untenable and is an affront to what has made Howard County such a desirable place to live. The question should not focus on how our schools can survive but what can we do to make them thrive.

Educators have a myriad of ideas and practices to ensure students can continue on their educational journey. Experienced educators have had to learn them over time, and new teachers will learn them out of necessity. I push back on this question by asking when will we keep our promise and consistently provide our schools with the resources needed to remain highly effective? When will we accept that survival mode is an all too common way for systems to plan their strategies and it results in cheating our students of the academic experiences they deserve? When will the powers that be turn to the population and ask them to provide what our schools need to fully support the students?

12. In the past, the Operating Budget Review Committee (OBRC) has been tasked with reviewing only specific areas of the budget by Board of Education members. Currently, the OBRC reviews the entire budget. Which process do you prefer and why? Include how you believe the recommendations may better result in changes to the budget, in your answer.

I believe the best way to support the work of the Board of Education is for the OBRC to review the entire budget. The operating budget is complicated with many moving parts. A focus on a few specified areas can easily lead to OBRC members making recommendations that do not factor in all the relevant information. I envision the OBRC as a think tank and/or a source of reference the Board of Education members can task with diving deep on all of the budget. An example is the recommendation made regarding the issue of Para-educators for the Science Departments. As a part of the OBRC, two members joined me in gathering data to help provide a rationale for the recommendation to retain the positions. This approach helped convince board members to keep the positions as well as defend their rationale. We also added specific questions to be asked of the Superintendent including alternatives in case the positions were cut. We presented this modified recommendation at a public meeting and the Board of Education adopted the position. If we only looked at a portion of the budget, we might not have been able to develop the robust plan of alternatives. The more information the OBRC provides the Board of Education, the more informed their decisions will be.