

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	Kirsten Coombs/District 4
Campaign Address/Phone/Email	10000 Town Center Ave, Columbia, MD 21044; kirsten@kirstencoombms.org
Social Media Accounts	Twitter - @kirsten4Boe; FB – kirsten4boe
Education History	BS & BA, Accounting & History, Univ. of MD; MBA, UMUC
Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience	CPA (non-practicing); Financial Systems Implementations; SEC Reporting

Community Interest / Position Questions

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

I want to ensure that all Howard County children have access to a top-notch education, just as my daughter has had in her time in HCPSS. As a parent of a student attending high-needs schools, I want to be a voice for those who cannot attend meetings and need help navigating our system. Our students and staff deserve someone who is invested in all of Howard County, which I am. I've developed the experience and relationships necessary to be an effective Board member. I bring a balanced & collaborative approach, and now, more than ever, we need Board members with these qualities to unify our community. I want to build on the progress made since 2016. In the face of tremendous pressure, we ushered in new leadership, increased transparency, and demanded more data to inform our decisions – but we need to build on that progress. In my next term, I will focus on addressing opportunity gaps and disparities for our most vulnerable children, including students of color and those receiving special education; improving relationship-based teaching and social-emotional learning; and hiring the best educators and staff that represent our diverse community and retaining them with targeted supports.

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

Three years on the BOE have taught me a lot about the function of a Board and the daily activities of a large school system. We need Board members with the knowledge & experience to address our complex challenges. I worked in Accounting & Finance for 15+ years and have the necessary skills to analyze budgets and financial documents to ask informed questions. As a growing county, we receive more children without receiving the associated funding until the following year. Our current deficit also requires assistance from the County and support from our state delegation, as the Board is unable to levy taxes. As Chair of the BOE Legislative Committee and a member of the Maryland Association of Boards of Education Legislative Committee, I've built strong bipartisan relationships with local & state legislators, which led to meaningful improvements for HCPSS, particularly in the area of local control. In addition, I have significant experience in community service working with community members and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. These experiences enable me to work effectively with others through collaboration, rather than intimidation, to understand multiple perspectives.

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

I have been involved with local community issues for several years, attending and presenting testimony as an individual on various issues related to Downtown Columbia and education. I joined the Columbia Town Center Village Board and wrote and gave testimony regarding growth and development. I served as Treasurer for the Inner Arbor Trust and still advocate for its expansion to make a cultural park in downtown. As a Board of Education Member, I have had many opportunities to testify and work with elected officials at all levels - County, State, and Federal. I serve as a liaison to the Maryland Association of Boards of Education Budget Committee, Legal Services Association, and the Legislative Committee. These roles afford me the chance to work with and learn from Board Members and elected officials throughout the State of Maryland. My favorite volunteer activity was assisting elementary teachers at Running Brook. Working with children on sight words and helping teachers in their classrooms demonstrated the critical importance of classroom supports for our educators and students, and I have carried that lesson with me on the Board as I advocate for our schoolhouse needs.

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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)

Aside from opening a new school, the priorities should be: 1) capacity balancing; 2) feeder strength; and 3) demographic concerns.

1) The BOE has to consider the use of facilities and assure that they are used effectively and efficiently. It is difficult to ask for capital funds from the state if capacity exists around a potential site for new construction, additions, and/or renovations. We should not allow schools to remain severely overcrowded while we have under-enrolled schools elsewhere in the county.

2) Elementary and middle schools should have strong feeds to their next level schools. Feeds of less than 15% should be avoided and addressed so that students have some assurance of moving levels with their cohort.

3) Demographics should not be a driver to redistrict at any point. However, when determining attendance areas, demographic data should be analyzed and considered to ensure that schools represent the broader community. Concentrations of poverty present challenges for schools, as students living in low income households often arrive to school with significant needs, which can affect our educators' ability to effectively provide instruction and support. As a Running Brook, Wilde Lake MS/HS mom, I firmly believe that every school in Howard County is a high quality school, and we should continue to strive for integration of diverse communities in our school buildings.

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

The Howard County Public School System is a county-wide district that is funded by all Howard County taxpayers. An address is not tied in perpetuity to a particular school. Nevertheless, keeping neighborhoods and communities together should be a priority of managing capacity, and the centrality of school buildings to their attendance areas aligns with HCPSS policy. There are several mitigating circumstances that affect our ability to achieving a true community school model in Howard County. At the high school level, we only have 12 schools that serve the entire county, and many of these schools are not located near the highest concentrations of students. For example, the portion of the county to the east of I-95 has no neighborhood high school and has to travel several miles to any high school they would be districted to. Conversely, we have schools that are located within 1-2 miles of each other with overlapping neighborhoods and communities. HCPSS is also challenged by the different sizes of schools, which create problems as there are some schools that have 400 seats and some that have 800. So, while community cohesion should be a goal incorporated into our attendance area decisions, it is one of many factors that must be considered according to our policy and the challenges in achieving it uniformly reflect the reality of our county.

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

As a public school system, HCPSS must accept all students that present appropriate county residency documents. We continue to receive more students than brick and mortar buildings can house, which is expected to continue. HCPSS must employ a range of strategies to manage overcrowding. First, we need to ensure that schools do not remain significantly overcrowded while other schools nearby remain under-enrolled. In the immediate term, we have been forced to utilize portable classrooms to expand capacity. The 200+ portable classrooms currently used will require a large capital outlay to replace with brick & mortar space. They are not intended and should not be used as long-term solutions for managing enrollment growth. If capacity continues to be a problem, then programmatic ideas should be explored to allow families to voluntarily move to a school with available seats. If programmatic options are ineffective, then boundary lines should be adjusted. The Board must collaborate with our county and state elected officials to advocate for capital project funding. I supported bills to increase developer fees and extend APFO wait times to address overcrowding through legislation.

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)

One of the biggest assets to our county and its economy is our highly-rated school system. If developers are using our school system to market their properties, then they should contribute to schools in a meaningful way, and that includes increased fees. Rapid residential growth creates significant problems for existing residents, i.e. overcapacity schools, aging infrastructure, and increased traffic congestion. These issues must be addressed prior to project approval, without waivers or exceptions. As Chair of the Legislative Committee, I have worked closely with our county and state elected officials to discuss our concerns regarding residential growth. I supported Councilwoman Walsh's bills to extend APFO wait times and allow for increased developer fees. I opposed the state bill to mandate a redistricting process for capacity as this should be locally determined. The amended bill improved to require reporting and planning to address major capacity imbalances, which limit our ability to secure state funds for capital projects. For positive collaboration between the Board and Council, we need transparent communication between all members on pending legislation, enrollment data, and funding. Both bodies should accept responsibility for actions within their purview to manage student growth. I plan to continue my commitment to authentic partnership with the Council to work together to pass meaningful legislation that will improve the quality of life for all stakeholders.

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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)

Every child should access to the same level of education that the entire county offers. That means that every educator should have similar backgrounds and the ability to take professional development that aids the classroom. Facilities should have similar amenities and be maintained evenly across the county. Operations should prioritize building work orders based on severity and cost-benefit analysis using a standard system that incorporates age of building and effect on educational programs.

Where there are concentrations of poverty, HCPSS should leverage outside grants and programs that offer additional resources tailored to population need. If assessment data indicates that there are opportunity and achievement gaps, HCPSS should analyze the root causes and determine what can be done to address, mitigate, and resolve them. For example, if absenteeism is higher than the county, state, or Federal average, then additional Pupil Personnel Workers and Student Support Teams should be deployed in that community. HCPSS should explore partnerships with public and private entities to build relationships to leverage local expertise and existing supports.

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)

The BOE should invest in multiple strategies to individualize instruction for every student's unique learning needs. This includes continued investment in targeted programs and interventions for student populations at risk for disparate outcomes, such as the Black Student Achievement Program, community liaison programs, restoring paraeducators and resource teachers, and training in best practices for special education (e.g., evidence-based reading instruction, behavioral management and supports). In addition, we need to encourage diverse participation and representation in GT, Honors, and AP coursework for students from all backgrounds. At least one of our high schools implemented an initiative called, "GT/Honors/AP – Why Not Me?" – I believe this is the message our educators and staff should be communicating to our students, and it should be reflected in our Board priorities. In addition, we must also invest in a knowledgeable, diverse, and culturally-responsive workforce. This includes provision of behavior management strategies for educators and staff, best practices on reading and math instruction (particularly for students with learning disabilities), and tools for addressing implicit biases in schools. I support implementation of professional development opportunities focused on these areas, as well as proactive recruitment of a workforce that reflects the diversity in our student body.

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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)

I have spoken with people who worked on making this race non-partisan many years ago. Education should be above partisan politics, and I believe we should maintain a non-partisan BOE ballot. Those involved in education should work together across the political spectrum for the good of all children and stakeholders. In my campaign, and during my service on the Board, I have made a conscious effort to reach out to Democrats, Republicans, and Independents to discuss ideas for improving HCPSS. During the 2016 BOE campaign, I was the only candidate to attend both the Democratic and Republican annual dinner events. When forming my own opinions as a Board member and candidate, I act independently and am not beholden to partisan interests or pressure. Multiple viewpoints should be solicited and heard before final decision-making. Being an effective Board member requires collaboration and fighting together for our schools. We should demonstrate civility and respect for all opinions.

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

- 1) Improving educational outcomes for all students – Whether students receive special education services, experience economic hardship, participate in G/T courses, or have just entered HCPSS, they all deserve access to high-quality educators and programs tailored to their unique needs. Parents should also have transparent access regarding their child’s education.
- 2) Elevating educator voice – We must solicit and welcome educators’ voices. They must have the freedom to contribute input on programmatic decisions as they understand the daily classroom impacts. They do amazing things every day, and we should lift them up for the benefit of the system and their professional development. They are the experts in their field, and should be utilized prior to seeking outside consultants costing exorbitant amounts.
- 3) Addressing the Budget – We are facing very challenging budgetary times in the County, which will require Board members to make difficult decisions during the next term. I will fight for our educators and classroom supports. While not simple, it is absolutely necessary to protect the financial health of HCPSS and the County.

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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 believe the Superintendent’s budget accurately reflects the needs of our school system if we are to maintain our high quality education system. It is critical that we continue advocating for what our students, educators, and staff truly need, and what our community expects, to our county government. As an accountant by training, I understand that the Board needs to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars. As a parent of a daughter who attended a Title 1 school, I also understand that without advocacy for the classroom supports we need, our school system quality is at serious risk of decline. While I am on the Board, I will continue to fight for investment in our students and educators. Having said that, we know that the FY2021 budget is not going to be fully funded, as no HCPSS budget request has been in recent history. When reviewing cuts, my first priority will be to identify savings from non-classroom staffing and supports, including removal of the additional parochial buses and reduction of administrative salary increases and positions.

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

My priority is local control. As the Chair of the Legislative Committee, I’ve delivered testimony opposing HoCo 1-20 & 41-20 as they are overreaching into our policies. While the Board could not come to a consensus of the reporting bills, I personally believe that these create additional bureaucratic burdens on our system. HCPSS produces a lot of data on student achievement, demographics, and profiles, as well as educator and staff reports. MSDE, MD Department of Health, the Federal Departments of Agriculture and Education, and others require detailed reporting on a variety of HCPSS programs. Proposed bills on school capacity and enabling legislation for local real estate taxes & fees are necessary to assist our County in funding capital projects and I have supported these throughout my Board service.

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

Class sizes are too high, given the level of requirements and duties given to educators and the increasing behavioral issues in our classrooms. Particularly for our elementary schools and our most vulnerable students, class size impacts educator ability to manage classroom activities and deliver tailored instruction. Although special education is sometimes reviewed in isolation from general education, it should not be. The majority of children receiving special education services are in general education classrooms and staffing shortages affect every child.

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

Student performance should be measured by summative assessments, rather than standardized tests. Any standardized tests should be reviewed for their alignment to HCPSS curriculum, rather than the other way around. Tests should be used for monitoring the performance of students and assisting educators in determining differentiated instruction.

Educator performance should be assessed by administrators, and team leaders, with a review of student progress. If students are not improving, then administrators should analyze what the root cause is. Montgomery County has a peer review program that Howard County investigated with the partnership of HCEA, but it is very expensive. I would like to implement something like this that holds educators accountable.

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

We must apply approaches anchored in evidence to create safer schools, focused on prevention, preparedness, and response. In addition to creating a culture that supports student mental health and relationship-building, we need to have a clear plan for reporting concerns, assessing threat risk, and responding using an established emergency protocol that includes a mental health crisis response component. We should continue to review the evidence on the use of active shooter drills to determine their efficacy and their success in mitigating risk and responding to emergencies, as results are currently mixed. Several improvements should be made to physical security of some of our buildings. For example, front offices are using LobbyGuard system, which is out-dated and unreliable. Capital improvements and regular maintenance to secure buildings are necessary. When properly trained in youth development with priorities for relationship-building over punitive measures, School Resource Officers can be a positive asset for our students. SROs should be familiar with our school communities and appreciate the different experiences some communities have with policing.

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)

Board members have the oversight of the Superintendent, especially in regard to spending and personnel decisions. The Board should review the Superintendent's progress on an annual basis using pre-determined criteria. I believe the Board's oversight should involve agreed upon standard operating procedures, specifically regarding the Superintendent's proactive communications to the Board. Board members should receive all pertinent data to make decisions on items such as contracts or hiring and should have all requests responded to in a timely manner. Ultimately, the Superintendent should follow the Board's direction, but we are also partners in service to the school system, so collaboration, trust, and transparency are also critical. As the Superintendent is in the middle of his contract, and I am a sitting Board member who has helped write his performance evaluations, I do not think it is appropriate for me to opine on contract renewal at this time. While there are certainly instances where I disagree with Dr. Martirano, I have seen the morale of the system dramatically improve during his tenure. He has empowered staff and made positive change for HCPSS.

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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, HCPSS is not adequately serving the needs of the Special Education community. Although improvements have been made, significantly more progress is needed. We need to prioritize engagement of the special education community to provide input on screening, assessment, and intervention practices. When joint initiatives between the community and administrators have occurred, they have benefited the school system tremendously by working together to determine priorities. For instance, the work conducted by multiple stakeholders to select the universal dyslexia screening tool should be a model for other special education workgroups. Our special education staff need increased supports in terms of staffing to manage caseloads and professional development on best practices for instruction and behavior management. The Temporary Employee model should be eliminated to ensure high-quality staff are working with our most vulnerable students. I supported Dr. Martirano's proposed budgets in FY2020 and FY2021 to increase staffing to appropriate levels. The number of students receiving special education support has risen, but staffing has not. This has negative impacts for all students.

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