

# The People's Voice, LLC

## Ethics Ballot™

3600 Saint Johns Lane, Suite D, Ellicott City, MD

### ETHICS BALLOT QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Howard County Board of Education Primary 2024

Congratulations on your decision to run for the Howard County Board of Education. The People's Voice is a civic/political organization in Howard and Montgomery Counties. We have over 4,800 members in Howard County and sponsor the non-partisan Ethics Ballot. If you would like to seek endorsement to The Ethics Ballot please return this Questionnaire to [EthicsBallot@Gmail.com](mailto:EthicsBallot@Gmail.com) by midnight Tuesday March 26. Please note that all questionnaires are published on the website, [www.EthicsBallot.com](http://www.EthicsBallot.com). We will be in touch regarding endorsement dates soon after getting the questionnaires back. We pride ourselves in working hard for our endorsed candidates, and look forward to hearing your positions on important County issues. THANK YOU so very much for your time!

**Be sure to address all aspects of each question. Feel free to add additional pages with question numbers noted to provide more information on each question as needed, or fill in more space herein. Be sure to return via email in Word or text format.**

Name/District: **Pravin Ponnuri, District 1**

Campaign Address/Phone/Email/Social Media/Website (if not on MD Board of Elections site)

**Campaign Address: 4616 Broken Lute Way, Ellicott City MD 21042**  
**410-340-0529 / [PravinPonnuri@hotmail.com](mailto:PravinPonnuri@hotmail.com) / [www.PravinPonnuri.com](http://www.PravinPonnuri.com) / FaceBook: PravinPonnuriBOE**

Campaign manager: N/A

Educational & Employment History:

- **Master's in business administration**
- **Bachelor's in mechanical engineering**
- **Diploma in Labor Laws and Administrative Law**
- **Associate degree in Cost Accounting (Completed first year of the two-year examinations for ICWAI – Institute of Cost and Work Accountants of India).**
- **Currently working as the IT Project manager with the Federal Government, managing multi-million dollar IT projects.**

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Relevant Experience (including fiscal and budget management)

- **As the chief volunteer at the Indian Origin Network of Howard County (IONHoCo), I have had the opportunity to nominate four different IONHoCo volunteers to the OBRC and work closely with them over the past seven years. This experience has provided me with the perspectives of four different individuals on the school budget, in addition to my own analysis of the budget used for testifying over the years. I have had the opportunity to understand and review the budgets without getting lost in the details, ensuring that I maintain a clear perspective of the big picture necessary to make the fundamental budgeting changes required at HCPSS today.**
- **My background as an IT Project Manager in the Federal Government overseeing multimillion-dollar projects involving contracting, acquisition, execution, and monitoring will be beneficial in comprehending and overseeing the billion-dollar budget of HCPSS.**
- **Additionally, my educational background with an MBA and expertise in cost accounting will be beneficial in effectively overseeing fiscal and budgetary aspects throughout the entire budget lifecycle.**

Causes financially supported, fund raising work promoted

- **Supported The People's Voice in the 2020 & 2022 candidate endorsement financially and in kind.**
- **Financially support Indian Origin Network of Howard County for its outreach and environmental initiatives, such as the Food Bank during the pandemic, The Plate Bank to reduce single-use plastic, Adopt a Road program, Community Leaders Diwali Dinner, and other similar endeavors.**
- **Financially supported Columbia Community Care for the various food banks.**
- **Supported Community Ecology Institute (CEI) to promote a healthier lifestyle by getting people involved in farming.**
- **Supported Hope Works and Grace Community Church at the "Night to Shine" event.**

1. Why are you running for this office? What qualifications do you uniquely bring to hold this office? Describe why you feel you have a viable campaign.

- **For the past twenty years, as I have been observing and closely working with HCPSS, there has been a consistent sense of anxiety within the community during budgeting season. Instead of addressing budgeting issues strategically, both HCPSS and the BOE have been reactive and in a constant fire fighting mode when it comes to the budget. I am running to update our budgeting process to implement bottom-up budgeting to identify and eliminate inefficiencies within the system. Furthermore, I suggest adopting multi-year budgeting to facilitate more timely course corrections, as opposed to the last-minute adjustments made annually.**
- **There are 78 schools within HCPSS, and there is a significant disparity in the performance among these schools. This performance gap has been widening over the years, and it is crucial to reverse this trend. We must develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that all schools achieve high performance levels without relying on superficial changes.**

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- **Our school districts are heavily gerrymandered; it is crucial to transition towards the genuine concept of neighborhood schools.**
- **At times, it appears that our schools are centered on everything except education. It is essential to refocus on education and refrain from using the school system as a battleground for parental ideologies.**

**These issues are neither new nor complex to resolve. We simply need to ensure that our priorities are well-defined and maintain a consistent advocacy for the necessary changes.**

**Having worked closely with the County and school system for the past two decades advocating for education, APFO, and common-sense land use agreements, I have collaborated with individuals from diverse backgrounds. I believe I have established strong connections within the community to effectively communicate my message and recruit volunteers for the door-to-door outreach as needed.**

2. **What experience do you have with the HCPSS? Have you ever testified before the Board of Education? What positions did you take? (Those with vast experience, pick most important to you.)**

**I have served as the PTA 1st Vice President, Co-Chair of the HCPSS AAPI Commission alongside the Superintendent, member of the Calendar Committee, and participant in the Education Policy 8020 Revision committee for Grading and Reporting.**

**I have presented multiple testimonies, both online and in person, on behalf of the Indian Origin Network of Howard County (IONHoCo), The Peoples Voice (TPV), and as an individual. These testimonies have covered various topics such as advocating for a stronger APFO, promoting equity in the school system, enhancing security measures within schools, and safeguarding the rights of minorities, as well as supporting common-sense redistricting**

3. **Funding all the needs of the HCPSS community is harder than ever, given added mandated funding of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future program, and the past use of one-time Covid funds for recurring costs. How do you believe funding shortfalls should be addressed? What areas of the HCPSS budget do you believe are the best areas to cut in order to meet funding needs? Are there areas that you believe should be the last to ever have funding cut?**

**The current funding situation is concerning and is projected to deteriorate further with the full implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future program by June 2026. As per the MD Blueprint, all teachers' starting salaries must be a minimum of \$60,000 per year. When neighboring counties raise their starting salaries to \$60,000, Howard County will need to increase its starting salary from the current \$58,500 per year to a minimum of \$70,000 per year to remain competitive in attracting top local talent. This adjustment will significantly impact our budget. Furthermore, our deteriorating school infrastructure urgently requires renovations and expansion.**

**We must collaborate closely with the county and state to enhance our funding levels, while also examining internally to remove inefficiencies within the system. Here are a few ideas to begin with**

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- The recent appraisals have shown that HoCo home values have increased by an average of 20% compared to the last assessment. This will result in a projected \$200M annual increase in county revenue from property taxes over the next three years. It is imperative for the BOE to collaborate with the County Executive and County Council to secure a substantial portion of this additional revenue for the school system.
  - At present, the transfer tax rate on real estate sales in HoCo stands at 1.25%. Of this, 25% is allocated to HCPSS, 25% to the fire department, and the remaining 50% to Parks & Rec, Agriculture, and other sectors. With the recent surge in the Fire tax, the Fire Department has accumulated a surplus of approximately \$120M. Considering that the construction of a new fire station costs around \$16M, and with only a projected need for 5 or 6 additional fire stations in HoCo in the near future, the BOE could collaborate with the state to raise the percentage of the transfer tax allocated to the school system for the next five years or so.
  - The BOE should instruct the superintendent to establish a task force with the main objective of exploring alternative revenue sources like grants and donations to support the school system.
  - We must carefully examine resources that are not directly allocated to students or teachers to identify and eliminate inefficiencies. One key area to assess is the central office.
  - Lastly, we should prioritize the preservation of programs that set HCPSS apart and make it highly sought after, such as the GT programs, Strings Programs, and Special Education programs. These programs should be the last on the list for any potential budget cuts.
4. Where do you think school construction should be prioritized? How would you address getting schools built faster where they are most needed? Include your thoughts about how to juggle maintenance needs as well.
- The existing scoring system for school construction, which assigns weights to Capacity, Deferred Maintenance, State-Identified Facility Needs, and Age-Based Facility Needs, is inherently flawed and seemingly arbitrary. This is exemplified by the inconsistent prioritization of Capital Investment projects, such as the continual relegation of Dunloggin Middle School and Centennial High School renovation projects on the list. Please read my white paper on this topic that has been posted on my Facebook page.  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1zEiozAtNRXNV3tHA7y0uxoIQvrNUTmA2cK7yjA4a98k/edit>
  - We need to establish a clearly defined scoring system to ensure transparency and prevent susceptibility to political influences. The recent proposal to create a committee to evaluate the scoring system is a positive step forward.
  - When a school reaches the end of its operational lifespan, or when renovation costs are like those of constructing a new school, HCPSS should utilize a site selection process akin to that of building a new school. This ensures that schools are either constructed or renovated where they are needed. Please read my whitepaper on this topic that is also on my website and Facebook page  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/65c64ec3cf9971170094817c/t/65eb403cebf5af4c23a7a647/1709916222192/HS14+in+Elkridge.pdf>
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- **Construction costs have been increasing at a rate faster than inflation in recent years. With HoCo's AAA bond rating, it is worth exploring the advantages and disadvantages of issuing a "School Bond" to secure the necessary capital for quicker construction.**
  - **We should evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). While HoCo faced challenges with PPP in the construction of the courthouse, the issues may have been due to the contract terms rather than PPP being inherently flawed.**
  - **We need to fully leverage the state's "Build to Learn" program, which offers matching funds for school construction and renovation. Currently, we are not maximizing the benefits of this program and are missing out on potential funds.**
5. How do you think overcapacity school concerns should be addressed? Do you believe current enrollment projection methods need to be changed? If so, how? What, if anything, should be done, when enrollment ends up significantly higher than projected project estimates?

**Per the FY25 Capital Budget report following are the current and projected school capacities with the proposed FY2025 Capital Budget Projects.**

	<b>Current Capacity</b>	<b>SY 2033-2034 Capacity</b>
<b>Elementary School</b>	<b>99.6%</b>	<b>96.8%</b>
<b>Middle School</b>	<b>100.7%</b>	<b>96.7%</b>
<b>High School</b>	<b>96.2%</b>	<b>102.9%</b>

**Though these numbers may appear to be within reason, there are a few concerns on how these are calculated.**

- **The school capacities are calculated as a percentage of the number of teaching stations multiplied by a factor based on the school type (ES, MS, or HS). The number of teaching stations includes portables; however, portables should not be included in calculating the school capacity. Portables were not originally included in the school capacity calculation in 2014, but at some point, the calculation was changed to include portables.**
- **The project methods are based on the 'cohort survival ratio' method, which calculates the survival of the previous grade students to the next grade but does NOT consider new enrollment when a home is resold.**
- **Lastly, projecting 0.5 students per new household is not accurate and is significantly lower than the actual numbers.**

**We need to adjust the enrollment projection methods to exclude portables and to consider the actual impact of home resales and new homes.**

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**We need a strategic approach to addressing the overcapacity at some schools by**

- **Looking at the current and projected school capacities on an annual basis and making micro adjustments by redistricting when needed, instead of attempting to do a county wide redistricting as in 2019.**
- **We need to develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that all schools in the HCPSS consistently meet high standards of achievement and narrow the performance gap between schools.**
- **We should put an end to gerrymandering of school districts and implement the neighborhood school concept as a guiding principle.**

**These goals are not difficult to achieve; we simply need individuals who will not succumb to political pressure and will continue advocating for what is best for the students and the community.**

6. Do you believe the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) should be strengthened, weakened or left the same regarding school capacity? Why? Note any desired changes. Note how you feel the Board of Education can or should be involved in APFO.

**I have been advocating for the strengthening of APFO for a long time and attempting to eliminate developer influence in APFO, but unfortunately, I have not been as successful as I would have liked, but the effort continues.**

**There was a time when High School Capacity was not even considered for future residential development, but now the ES capacity is capped at 105%, MS capacity is capped at 110%, and HS capacity is capped at 115% from an APFO perspective for new residential development. However, this is still insufficient. I advocate for capping all schools at 100%. We must ensure that the infrastructure is able to support new home construction before proceeding. In the meantime, let's concentrate on attracting new businesses to the county to increase our tax base without overburdening the school system.**

**I support BOE having a seat at the APFO table.**

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8. Describe positions you have taken, votes you have made, or testimony you have given that you feel is the most important regarding HCPSS issues. Describe how you championed causes, include at least one example of any of your positions or votes that you regret, or about which you feel differently.

**My guiding philosophy on any new development is that we should allow new development only if we can ensure that the quality of life of the current residents is not adversely impacted in any way by the new development.**

**I have advocated on numerous occasions for bolstering APFO and for ensuring proper land use agreements are in place before embarking on new developments. I have also emphasized the importance of transparency and empathy in the redistricting process, calling for an end to gerrymandering of school districts that distorts performance metrics.**

9. How do you feel altercations should be handled in schools? Include any staffing changes you believe should occur.

**Education, Intervention, Empathy, Counseling, and Accountability should be the guiding principles for addressing conflicts. It is essential to educate children on conflict resolution strategies, emphasizing communication over resorting to altercations. As adults, immediate intervention is key to preventing conflicts from escalating. Empathy should be shown to all parties involved, providing counseling on better ways to handle disagreements. Consequences must be established for repeat and intentional offenders.**

**Altercations in schools should be handled in a calm and professional manner to ensure the safety and well-being of all individuals involved. It is important for school staff to intervene promptly to de-escalate the situation and prevent any further escalation of violence. Communication is key in resolving conflicts, and it is essential to listen to all parties involved to understand the underlying issues. Restorative justice practices can also be effective in addressing conflicts and promoting accountability and understanding among the students. Additionally, providing counseling and support services to those involved can help address any underlying issues and prevent future altercations.**

**An SRO may be necessary in high schools to address repeat and willful offenders, but it should be considered as a last resort, not the first.**

10. What HCPSS policies do you believe should be changed regarding protections of marginalized groups? Include in your answer your views on how to address achievement gaps.

**I believe that HCPSS policies should be updated to include more comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination measures to protect marginalized groups. Additionally, policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion should be reinforced to create a more inclusive and safer environment for all students. Training and education for staff on cultural competency and sensitivity towards marginalized groups should also be prioritized.**

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**Freedom of speech is important, but it should not come at the expense of intimidating other groups, as has been the case in the recent past following the start of the Israel-Gaza conflict.**

11. What criteria should be prioritized in redistricting?

**As the county experiences growth and constructs new schools, redistricting becomes an unavoidable process. However, it is important to recognize that redistricting impacts students and their families on a deep level, impacting their schedules, activities, relationships, and academic performance, as well as other enriching school experiences. Therefore, any decisions regarding redistricting should be made with complete transparency and empathy. It is important to regularly assess school capacities on a yearly basis and implement smaller, less disruptive adjustments instead of relying solely on county-wide redistricting when necessary.**

11. Special education funding has increased over the last several years, but special education student outcomes have not improved. How would you address the legal requirements for students with disabilities to ensure positive outcomes?

**Special Education in HCPSS has come a long way since the tenure of Ms. Renee Foose. While significant improvements have been made, there is still much more that can be done to support students with special needs.**

**To address the legal requirements for students with disabilities and ensure positive outcomes, it is essential to focus on individualized education plans (IEPs) that are tailored to each student's unique needs and abilities. This may involve providing more specialized support services, implementing evidence-based interventions, and involving parents/guardians in the decision-making process. Additionally, ongoing training and professional development for special education teachers and staff can help improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Prioritizing early intervention, fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment, and regularly monitoring and evaluating progress are also crucial steps in ensuring positive outcomes for students with disabilities.**



12. What research, contract accountability and financial data would you require before supporting a procurement contract? Include in your answer what changes you would recommend to avoid service failures like we experienced recently with the bus system?

**Before supporting a procurement contract, I would require thorough research, contract accountability measures, and access to detailed financial data. This includes conducting a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis to ensure the proposed contract is financially viable and aligns with the organization's budget constraints. Additionally, I would require a detailed review of the vendor's track record, reputation, and references to verify their capacity to deliver on their commitments.**

**To avoid service failures like those experienced recently with the bus system, I would recommend implementing the following changes:**

- **Improved Vendor Selection Process:** Implement a rigorous vetting process for selecting vendors, including conducting thorough background checks, verifying experience and references, and evaluating past performance on similar contracts.
- **Clearly Defined Performance Metrics:** Clearly outline performance expectations and key performance indicators (KPIs) in the contract to hold vendors accountable for service delivery.
- **Regular Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the vendor's performance throughout the contract term to identify any issues early on and address them promptly.
- **Transparent Communication:** Foster open and transparent communication channels between the organization and the vendor to address any concerns, changes, or issues that may arise during the contract period.
- **Consequences for failure to deliver.**

**By implementing these changes, organizations can better mitigate risks, ensure quality service delivery, and ultimately enhance the success of procurement contracts while avoiding service failures.**

**Those familiar with contract management understand that these are fundamental principles of vendor selection and contract award. It is crucial to adhere to these principles diligently and avoid making assumptions.**