

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	Saif Rehman – D5
Campaign Address/Phone/Email	PO Box 334, Glenelg, MD 21737 – saif@vote4rehman.com, (301) 655-7161
Social Media Accounts	https://vote4rehman.com/ https://www.facebook.com/REHMAN4BOE/ https://twitter.com/REHMAN4BOE
Education History	Ph.D. – Management Information Systems – Northcentral University Masters – Management Information Systems – University of Baltimore Bachelors – University of Central Missouri
Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience	Proficient in Multiple Languages Skills & Experience 28 + years of professional experience Experience working with commercial & government agencies of all sizes. Experience managing budgets over \$1.4 billion dollars and over 40,000 consultants 14 years as a founder & CEO of Information Technology firm (expertise in Budgeting, Procurement, Executive Leadership, resource management, operations & organizational development) Member of multiple non-profit boards Certified Instructor & Project Management Professional

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Community Interest / Position Questions

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

I'm running because, as the parent of three wonderful children in the Howard County school system, I want to help preserve and defend their right to a great public education.

For, education isn't a political topic. Public education has allowed me, from a poor family, to learn, work hard, and grow up to become not only an US citizen, but also a successful business owner.

We face a period of crucial and difficult decisions, many the result of a lack of leadership, budget and procurement experience at board level. We have a critical need for top-level management skills on the BOE, full transparency, rigorous and ongoing spending reviews, and better communication with the community.

My nearly thirty years of professional career experience in the IT industry, including 14-years of running my own company, make me the right fit for the position. I have worked in both private and public sectors where I have saved shareholders and taxpayers millions of dollars. We need experienced leadership to guide us through righting our fiscal ship and keeping our focus on those we serve, the students of Howard County.

I am ready to have that immediate impact.

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

As an engaged parent with three young children in HCPSS, I'm prepared to provide the Board of Education experience and skilled organizational leadership. My career spanning almost thirty years in Information Technology includes last 14 years running my own firm. NextGen Consulting has been recognized by Inc. 500 as one of the best and fastest growing IT companies in America. My career also includes extensive government consulting work, saving taxpayer dollars with efficient Information Technology solutions.

I understand working within means to maximize savings. A board member's job is to ensure that every dollar provided to the school district goes towards meeting our children needs – whether it's money for hiring new teachers, providing more technology resources, building new schools, or any number of sorely needed improvements.

Today, we face system-wide budget shortfalls. If elected, I'll bring to the board years of organizational management know-how, leadership, budgeting and procurement experience. I'll make a difference from day one, utilizing my business background to get the most out of our budget.

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

I sit on multiple non-profit boards that are either business or community focused. My volunteer work spans working with various organizations helping different communities and businesses. The majority of my volunteer work involves working with two of the largest minority organizations in the country. This work is focused on helping small businesses who are either starting or need additional support in understanding the nuances of doing business with the federal government.

With three little kids, I also spend as much time as possible to volunteer with community activities where my kids are involved. For example, I am currently volunteering with the HCYP Basketball League as the commissioner. I also either attend or follow all the meetings with CAC, SECAC, PTA's & BOE, County Council & County Executive in person or online to stay updated not only on educational activities but county as a whole.

I believe the next step in my passion for service to the community is to bring leadership and budgeting skills and an open mind to the HCPSS Board of Education.

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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 redistricting is not a solution to a problem, but rather a short-term patch to avoid making the tougher decisions when it comes to a growing, prosperous community like Howard County.

Our families have been through enough grief as the Board has tried to use redistricting to make schools fit a political agenda. Families don't want politics running their school system, they want what is in the best interest of students. Deciding who the haves and have-nots are in our schools does not deliver on the promise of a great public education for all, but instead provides a great education for none. Howard County must stop this social experimentation and, if elected, I intend to push for a return to a neighborhood schools model - meaning students will move up through a traditional feeder system that ensure families know, from the first day of Kindergarten to senior year, what schools their children will attend.

My three top priorities that must be considered when redistricting:

1. Focus only on capacity, meaning limit the redistricting to schools central to the overcrowding issue in order to disrupt as few students and families as possible.
2. Any redistricting must be considered from the viewpoint of a neighborhood feeder schools model.
3. Redistricting must only be considered when a long-term plan for opening a new school is already in place.

We must have a long-term strategy to ensure there are clear policies in place to initiate these steps.

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

Absolutely! One of my main priorities for running to school board is to put an end to the social experiment of redistricting and return our schools to a more traditional, neighborhood-schools model. Families will start to consider other communities if they cannot trust that the great schools, they move for will continue to be those same schools as their children grow up. We must protect our school district by protecting our neighborhood schools.

That also means we need to make sure that every school in Howard County is a great school. Redistricting doesn't tackle the issues that some Howard County schools face, but instead hides the problems by shifting students to different schools. This is not a solution. It's a cop out. Our school board must keep our eyes on the future and do what it takes to make sure all of Howard County Schools are successful.

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

Overcapacity is the consequence of a great school district attracting new families into the community, but not building the necessary schools to support incoming students. This is an immediate issue that requires a long-term solution. To deal with overcapacity, we need to come together as a community and relentlessly comb through the budget to eliminate every dime of waste. We should explore additional possibilities / out of box thinking like strategic partnerships with businesses and organizations instead of relying on only the budget to meet all of our needs.

The Board and County administration should also work to examine the specific needs of each school. When it comes to overcrowding, “trailers” should be a temporary solution and not the new normal. These are, at best, an extra expense that could be put towards new school construction.

The Board needs to plan ahead to avoid the issues we have experienced with redistricting, or at least have a long-term strategic redistricting plan when new schools come online. We need to have the next school ready to go when it is needed, and we’ll do that by working proactively with all possible stakeholders.

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, developers definitely need to contribute more funds to the schools. They benefit from the school system with people willing invest significantly higher than average market prices for similar housing in neighboring counties. The recently passed school facility surcharge resolution (CB42-2019) is a good start, even though the final version with amendments leaves a lot to desire.

The developers definitely need to wait longer to let the Board catch up with overcapacity issues. The wait needs to be longer than the current 3 years. As we have seen from various estimates, the average new school takes three or more years to be built.

County Council is also responsible for zoning and must work with the BOE to ensure that zoning decisions are in sync with school capacity expectations to ensure development is at the right pace and in the right place. They also are responsible for funding and need to ensure that any development is supported by new school funding.

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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)

As an immigrant who came to this great country on a student visa, I know full-well that education is the best equity policy. If I wasn't afforded equal educational opportunities, I wouldn't be where I stand today. I wouldn't have my three degrees, the business I own, or the ability to provide for my family.

Despite being the top county by income in the country, not every student is so fortunate. We must consider that in our community decisions. We have to make sure all students have equal access to educational resources and facilities. We must provide teachers with all the tools necessary to empower our children to reach their full potential. We need to continue to integrate the many cultural voices, which make Howard County so delightfully distinctive, into our curriculum, workforce, and professional learning standards.

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)

Providing the resources needed for each individual student to ensure that he or she has the opportunity to succeed when they leave our school system, whether heading to college or a career. It is the job of BOE members to ensure they are setting the right policies for students to thrive, developing targeted priorities for the needs of each school, and managing the budget appropriately to ensure funds are spent effectively to meet those priorities.

With three children in the school system, I have come to realize that homework does not help with student learning. If the goal is to reinforce learning, it can be done with less homework. Each child learns at a different pace and it has been proven students thrive when differentiation is applied to student curriculum. That commitment to differentiation can help in the pursuit of closing the achievement gap. GT programs challenge students with additional learning that excel in different areas to continue achieving their maximum potential and I am in favor of providing these opportunities to all students.

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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)

Education is not a partisan issue. As Americans, we should all believe that an education is a right entitled to all our citizens. While we may disagree on issues within the public education structure, and those disagreements may come from a place of political ideology, school board elections based on partisan ideas will lead to the same gridlock and conflict we see too often within our federal and state governments.

My campaign has broad support across the political spectrum, whether Democrat, Republican, or Independent. I am a firm believer that to ensure our school board is focused on education, we must elect representatives that put students and families, not partisan politics, first in every decision.

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. Restore Neighborhood Schools - HCPSS must stop the social experimentation of redistricting and return to a neighborhood schools' model. This will mean that families will know, from the first day of Kindergarten to senior year, what schools their children will attend. I will work with other board members to create a neighborhood feeder model and with community input pass the policy for any future redistricting.

2. Budgeting & Procurement - A board member's job is to ensure that every dollar provided to the school district goes towards meeting our children's needs. Howard County needs board members with visionary leadership that can think outside the box. If elected, I will work with staff to review all current practices of allocating taxpayers' dollars to maximize savings and minimize costs and eliminate wasteful spending.

3. Transparency & Accountability - As is often said, sunshine is the best disinfectant and I believe our school board needs a serious scrubbing with the sunlight. Every decision made should be transparent to all stakeholders. When elected, it will be my mission to create an open and transparent board & ensure that we are held accountable for all our decisions.

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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)

My first issue is that the budgeting process itself is not transparent. When there is no defined process in place, no one is able to effectively measure whether a budget is too high or low. No one is able to know how contracts are negotiated, where the funds are being spent, and how effective that spending is to student outcomes. There is no guidance as to what the priority of the budget is, no justification to the budget line items additions or cuts, and only a general argument that the budget must be balanced for the sake of the numbers.

I would recommend creating a defined process visible to every stakeholder and create an independent CFO position that reports directly to the Board. This role would help provide both clarity to the budget process, but also allow the superintendent to focus on education policies and running the school system.

As to this year, any cuts can come in multiple forms depending on priority. Putting a hold on the redistricting process will save significant transportation costs. Freezing any salary bumps, streamlining administrative staff, and review any new contracts are all potential money savers as well.

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

In general, state delegates should stay away from meddling into the independently elected school board of the county. Forcing trigger processes or strong-arming board decisions to meet certain political demands does not benefit Howard County families.

I will push back on any politician pushing agendas that threaten the independence of our school board. The people of Howard County trust their elected representatives to do their due diligence and it is important that school board members keep that in mind.

Specific Bill Positions:

1-20 – Disapprove – The BOE already does this and have data that can be utilized by the delegates instead of enforcing such a policy.

2-20 – Disapprove – People do their due diligence and research and use real estate experts to determine what area or school system they want to move to.

4-20 – Disapprove – See possible issues for any future redistricting.

6-20 – Disapprove – Did not pass delegation.

13-20 – Approve – Provides support and control for overcrowding. However, the legislation may have legal issues regarding its implementation.

23-20 – Disapprove – Redundant. Did not pass delegation.

1511 – Disapprove – Redundant reporting.

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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 and the result of a dysfunctional process for dealing with budgetary issues. Every year class sizes increase in an effort to stretch our teachers, paras, and support staff instead of hiring the additional people necessary to lower the class sizes and improve student outcomes. With each increase in classroom size we move farther away from our district goal of providing equitably resources and opportunities for all students to reach their maximum potential.

With three children in HCPSS, I have experienced first-hand how support provided to my children from year to year has suffered due these cuts in staff and increased class sizes. Every teacher I talked to shares their concerns for this continues cuts. Increasing their workload to save money has caused extremely low morale among staff and this lack of support creates a domino effect of problems leading all the way to negatively impacting student outcomes. I intend to tackle this issue head-on by combing over our school budget and reviewing our procurement practices to redirect wasteful spending towards effects to shrink class sizes and improve opportunities in our schools.

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

The success of our students must be measured by more than just a standardized test and those scores are not nearly enough to measure all the ways our teachers support their students. As a parent, I too often worry about my children being over tested and becoming burned-out with their education experience. To prepare our students for the 21st century requires inspiring them to learn, not testing the love of learning out of them.

Thanks to advances in technology, significant research in learning processes, and the negatives outcomes that have manifested in recent workforce declines, our schools need to focus on serving the whole child and we must be a school system that examines how successful we are in implementing such initiatives. This requires that we stop testing for the sake of testing and start measuring our children's success, and in turn the success of their educators, with diverse methods such as portfolio reviews, in-person interviews, and varieties of assessments. Growth in the areas of social understanding, emotional management, and academic success of every student should what we measure and that means thinking outside the box of standardized testing.

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

The steps recently taken in the form of resource officers, building physical security like cameras, buzzer system for building entry are a positive step. We can stay engaged with law enforcement or other government agencies to continually look for better ways to improve our physical safety.

However, safer schools start when we identify problems before they become threats. The best options our board can provide are to keep class sizes small, eliminate vulnerable portables and, most importantly, hire additional teachers and counselors that can help identify struggling students that may be in crisis. We must continually keep the lines of communication open with our community, law enforcement, healthcare experts and all stakeholders to ensure we keep evaluating our practices to ensure a balanced approach toward physical and emotional safety of our children where they feel welcomed and thrive in a learning environment.

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 are elected to create policies and the superintendent is tasked with implementing them. Since my involvement with the school system, that has not been the case because of a lack of leadership experience. By that I mean for multiple years HCPSS Board has been ineffective at monitoring, supporting, and evaluating the work of the superintendent. They have served as nothing more than a rubberstamp.

Our current situation is much the same. Over the last year, the number of administrative staff increased along with their higher than market salaries while at the same time cuts were made to classroom resources, programs, and staff. Instead of dealing with overpopulation problems head-on, our superintendent promoted a redistricting policy more focused on political ambitions and social experimentation than providing adequate solutions to the crisis. We can do better.

But finding a new leader isn't the only solution. As a board, we must ensure our school system has clearer guidelines for the role of the new superintendent and employment contracts with measurable directives. There is a better way and, when elected, I will bring that much needed leadership to the board.

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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, I do not believe we are serving the needs our special education students and community at large. Special needs students should be offered more than the minimum and should be presented with curriculum and lesson plans that result in meaningful development and change. Budgetary cuts have targeted special education staff more than any other need. As a school board member, my first step would be to restore those cuts to ensure that we have adequate staff in our special education programs. We need to ensure that we are not only looking for additional staff continuously, but we offer the resources and training needed for the current staff to meet the diverse needs of our students.

I plan to investigate collaborations with various specialized groups across our state in order to provide our children more effective resources and personalized services. Working with specialized programs across our community and state will allow us to increase the rate of success with accurate diagnoses, targeted student support services, and a diverse coalition of people working together to help our children discover success.

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