



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

## Individual Information

Name/District	Gene Ryan District 5
Campaign Address/Phone/Email	12975 Highland Road, #602, Highland, MD 20777 GeneRyan4BOE@gmail.com
Social Media Accounts	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/GeneRyan4HCPSSBOE">https://www.facebook.com/GeneRyan4HCPSSBOE</a>
Education History	See Resume/Responses
Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience	See Resume/Responses

## Community Interest / Position Questions

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

I have long been engaged in many efforts to improve our coveted school system. For example, early in the current Superintendent's tenure, I was asked to join a newly created HCPSS Superintendent's Advisory Committee designed to report directly to the Superintendent about matters including special education and school capacity. Unfortunately, the panel was short-lived as the Superintendent became immersed in other activities. Nonetheless, my advocacy for all Howard County kids and families has continued.

An effective BOE positively impacts the quality of life for an entire community. The HCPSS Board of Education must understand that tremendous responsibility and embrace its obligation to govern a wide array of school issues.

Unfortunately, HCPSS achievement benchmarks have been declining over the years. Graduation rates continue to sink, and increasing numbers of children with disabilities and their families have been forced to fight for their right to a Free Appropriate Public Education. While our achievement standards are decreasing, the HCPSS budget has been steadily increasing. Essentially, our community is getting less but paying more.

Over my many years of public service, I have built strong relationships with county government and community leaders. Coupled with my vast school board and public administration experience, I bring a unique set of skills and abilities which will help solve the many challenges facing our school system.

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

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

Please see the previous answers.

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

For nearly two decades, I have been actively engaged in issues that impact our community. Aside from previously serving on school boards in NJ, I have also served on several Howard County government boards. Our community will not evolve into the place we all want it to be unless we each become engaged as part of the solution. To that end, I have appeared dozens of times to testify before local, regional, and national regulatory bodies.

As always, I historically begin by advocating for our kids and our community at the local level in hopes that our local leaders will heed the call to action. When those efforts have proven futile, I have not thrown my hands up and walked away. I also did not merely repeat the same approach over and over in hopes of a different outcome. Instead, I have escalated situations, described the challenges, and then proposed real-world solutions until a positive change occurred.

Under the prior HCPSS Superintendent, waste, fraud, and mismanagement were commonplace. While many were aware, and some even spoke up, no board of education members or other local elected leaders took meaningful action to improve the situation. In 2018, I, along with a few other county residents, testified before the Maryland Senate about the waste and abuse happening at HCPSS. That testimony ultimately led to the creation of a Maryland Inspector General watchdog, responsible for investigating local schools and holding elected leaders accountable. Just this month, the first-ever Maryland Inspector General assumed office.

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

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)

Please see my response to Question 5.

---

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 term redistricting is unique to Howard County and means different things to different people. I believe, and evidenced-based research supports, communities need to stay together so children and families can thrive.

This BOE and previous HCPSS BOEs have failed to succinctly identify the issues that they try to solve each time they further divide our county. I have heard numerous current BOE members, and some present candidates, say that redistricting is inevitable. I do not see it this way. Furthermore, these same people have shown us that they believe it is their job to determine what form or fashion communities should be divided. These incorrect assumptions are the consequence of failed leadership and have resulted in a divisive Howard County.

It is not possible to effectively solve a problem if stakeholders do not first understand the issue. Unfortunately, during this latest flawed redistricting, we watched in disbelief as elected BOE members could not even agree amongst themselves about the problem they were attempting to fix. As I relayed in my testimony before the BOE, this latest redistricting debacle was a deflection of responsibility by school system leadership for failing to provide support for all students in all schools.

If the challenge is capacity, the solution does not necessarily require separating communities. There are a host of alternative solutions. Leadership requires that questions be asked, and personal agendas are sidelined from the process. That has not happened at HCPSS, but together we can change that reality.

So, did the BOE identify property currently owned or leased by the school district and which might fit the need for additional school space? Are there presently empty school buildings that could be used to meet capacity while keeping entire communities together?

The answer is no, the Board did not ask, and yes, there are currently school properties in high-density areas that sit empty for no good reason. There are many other solutions available too, but first, our elected leaders must understand the problem and be capable of thinking creatively to identify innovative solutions. I have a host of other options to meet HCPSS infrastructure needs, and I look forward to sharing those ideas with our community during my campaign.

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

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

Please see the previous answer.

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)

School capacity is a multifactorial challenge. In Howard County, the public-school system has wrongly become a proxy for failed zoning and development oversight. It is not the local education authority's function to regulate community growth. The County Executive and Council must embrace their responsibility and stop unfairly deflecting to the public-school system.

As a sitting member of the Howard County Board of Appeals, I am responsible for examining matters involving land use. I must remain objective and not let my personal bias play into the decisions I make as a board member. To that end, it would be inappropriate for me to expound upon my own beliefs regarding Howard County's development. Our County Council is responsible for establishing the law, and it is my responsibility as a Board of Appeals member to follow the law as written. If elected to the Board of Education, I will be resigning from my position on the Howard County Board of Appeals.

Understanding how school overcrowding has reached a crisis level is essential, but only so we do not repeat our mistakes of the past.

The unfortunate reality is that money buys votes. Special interest groups, such as political action committees and irresponsible developers, use money to gain influence over political candidates and elected officials. Electing weak candidates, or those with little experience in public administration does not lend itself to transparent policymaking.

The overarching answer for solving school capacity is through collaborative and innovative solutions. My many years of public administration and school board experience have allowed me to realize and facilitate these types of meaningful solutions.

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

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

Equitable education means that ALL children in ALL schools receive the support necessary to ensure they have the opportunity to achieve.

The HCPSS Board of Education must understand our community's vision and deliver that vision as an expectation to the Superintendent. Of equal importance, the Board must ensure the Superintendent has the tools he or she needs to be successful. Finally, the Board of Education must hold the Superintendent accountable for the identified outcomes.

When appropriate, the HCPSS BOE must provide acknowledgment of a job well done, and when necessary, the HCPSS BOE must enforce consequences to eliminate failures in leadership.

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 question demonstrates the very mindset that proves fatal in failing school districts. Each child is different, and a one size fits all approach to education marginalizes the needs of so many children. Each student has unique challenges and abilities. The key to positive outcomes is using differentiated instruction. However, it is misguided to believe that the HCPSS BOE is responsible for directing education.

Boards of education representatives are not education experts. Instead, BOE members are tasked with administrative oversight of public-school systems. Effective and impactful leaders understand the responsibility and value of recognizing the needs of the people they supervise. If the HCPSS BOE is serious about meeting the needs of all students in all schools, they must listen to feedback from the subject matter experts they have hired to do the work of educating children.

During recent budget hearings, each BOE member asked various leadership staff what resources they needed, in addition to those already included in the Superintendent's proposed budget. Following those many budget work sessions, the BOE than inexplicably began cutting millions of dollars from the proposed budget and increased class sizes. It is difficult to understand what type of legitimate leadership would take that approach to inspiring teachers and staff.

The educational management team clearly explained to the BOE what they needed to be successful, and in return, the Board failed to provide that level of support. The display was a catastrophic failure by the Board of Education.

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

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)

The Board of Education must be non-partisan. Special interest groups have a unique ideology that does not necessarily benefit all students and communities. This type of influence has no place in public schools, yet we can see it very clearly during this current election. It is disappointing to see special interest money and power playing such a massive role in candidate funding and support. I hope that our community will see these influences for what they are and agree with me that they should be stopped. Not everything in Howard County is for sale and, most certainly, not our children's future.

I have refused to accept all special interest group funding, with the full understanding that decision may prove to hurt my campaign. I have chosen to run my campaign the same way I lead my life, with honesty and transparency. How can we ever expect our kids to treat each other with kindness and fairness when we, as adults, cannot even follow those rules?

Once this campaign has ended and November is a distant memory, win or lose, I will be able to look my children and our community in the face and tell them we fought to help all kids and all families, and we did it without compromising our integrity.

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

My top priorities as an HCPSS BOE Representative are urgent and clear.

I plan to collaboratively build a BOE that fully appreciates the organization's intended role as a board of governors and not a group of micromanagers.

I plan to inspire and empower our educational leaders to deliver on the promise that all children deserve the opportunity to achieve.

Finally, and most importantly, I plan to earn back the community's trust in the Howard County Public School System.

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

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 have the same information available to every other resident of Howard County. While I have my beliefs about the proposed budget, it would be irresponsible for me to take a specific position without having complete access to all the supporting data.

Instead, the more crucial question I believe we should be asking is if the current BOE provided the Superintendent with clear direction during the preparation of his annual budget.

The nearly \$1 billion school budget should not be a topic of conversation limited to the few short weeks leading up to submission to the County Executive. The public-school budget is a living document which the BOE must continually examine to determine efficiencies and ensure fiscal responsibility.

The budget process is flawed, much in the same way the redistricting process was flawed. A lack of intentionality, strategic planning, and foresight have led to a loss in public support once again. As a Board member, I commit to doing my part and fixing this drifting ship before our treasured school system passes the point of no return.

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

Unfortunately, I am unable to answer this question because it lacks clarity and specificity.

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

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

The reality is that class sizes in Howard County Public Schools are highly variable. HCPSS policy prescribes the desired student to teacher class size ratio. Unfortunately, we have all seen and experienced how those numbers can be little more than wishful thinking. I was infuriated as I watched this current BOE decide the first choice for saving money was to make life and learning harder for our students and educators by yet again raising class sizes.

Smaller class sizes and lower student to teacher ratios result in better student outcomes and improved teacher performance. This information is not my opinion, but instead, it is the unanimous conclusion of countless evidence-based and research-based studies.

However, class size is not a one-dimensional issue. All students are unique and have unique needs. Considering only a student to teacher ratio, without also considering the individual needs of a student or the abilities of a teacher, achieves very little. Just using an adult to child ratio fails to account for student acuity. For example, how many students within a class have a disability, receive 504 plan accommodations, or have an IEP? Understanding that information will allow instructional leaders to better plan class sizes and determine what resources are needed to empower teachers and students. Additionally, not all classrooms are the same physical size, so why then is there a one size fits all approach to class size?

The simplicity of the HCPSS student to teacher ratio calculation also fails to define what constitutes a “teacher.” It has been reported that HCPSS considers paraeducators and other less qualified or non-certified support staff as “teachers.” Additionally, some of those adults are assigned to assist specific students in a class and are not necessarily available or qualified to meet the needs of all students. This lack of data clarity leads to an inaccurate representation of real student to teacher ratios.

If the goal is to ensure each child has an opportunity to achieve, then we must consider a multitude of factors when calculating class sizes.

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

Please refer to my prior answers.

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

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

The most critical responsibility of any school system is the physical safety and wellbeing of children. Kids cannot learn, and educators cannot teach if they do not feel safe. However, it is not just about feeling safe; it is about actually being safe.

Much like education, meaningful physical safety strategies are a science of evidenced-based peer-reviewed best practices. In other words, Howard County school leadership should not be guessing at what works. Instead, school security leadership personnel must work collaboratively with other school districts and public safety professionals around the country to identify specific solutions for HCPSS. Doing what we have always done will not work and will end up costing lives if we continue with that mindset.

For more than two decades, I have worked as a public safety career professional focused on building resilient communities. In early 2000, shortly after the Columbine school massacre, I formed a think tank with other professionals from Princeton University. Together our team worked to understand the challenge of childhood avengers in schools. We identified innovative solutions that involved hardening soft targets, such as school buildings and events. We also sought to understand root causation for specific forms of violence against others. Later during my college studies, I focused on disaster epidemiology with a concentration in intentional wounding incidents.

My comprehensive understanding of public safety is not just academic. During my career, I have responded to mass violence incidents and participated in after-action reviews around the world. The lessons I have learned and the things I have seen drive my passion and commitment to keep all our children safe today. There is no greater gift and responsibility in life than to be entrusted with the care of a child.

As a community member, I, like most everyone, have limited access to information related to specific security measures at HCPSS. The information I do have informs my belief that there are many areas where existing technology at HCPSS is not used efficiently to ensure safety and prevent tragedy. From a physical perspective, housing children in fiberglass classroom trailers is a weak solution for both security and education.

Once elected to the BOE, I am committed to governing with real leadership and holding school system chiefs accountable in all areas. Identifying the gold standard for school security and requiring an immediate gap analysis for HCPSS is a first step towards ensuring all children in all school environments are safe each day.

Gap analysis methodology and reporting should be a mandate across every domain and should be one of the critical tools used to inform budget, staffing, and other resource allocation decisions. These discussions need to be transparent and in the public view throughout the year, not just during the few weeks leading up to the annual budget submission.

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

I have grave concern for the fundamental misunderstanding this BOE, and past BOEs have regarding their role in school governance. Such a limited appreciation is understandable if the only exposure a Board member has ever had to public school administration has been by watching prior HCPSS Boards. Operating the same way that we have always operated is incredibly inefficient and dangerous. Our public-school system is needlessly wasting millions of dollars while simultaneously failing to deliver on the promises made to our children and families.

I bring a unique perspective and unparalleled experience to this position. In addition to my degree in public administration, I have been elected to several boards of education in NJ, and I have served on various municipal boards in Howard County. I bring the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help reshape how our schools operate. My decades of experience have allowed me to understand what works and what doesn't.

I understand that the fundamental function of a BOE member is to set clear expectations for the superintendent, provide the tools that he or she needs to be successful, and then hold that individual accountable for the outcomes. Each time I attend a BOE meeting, I am amazed and in disbelief, as I watch the superintendent seemingly run BOE meetings and dictate administrative oversight. Can you imagine a workplace where the employee was allowed, much less encouraged, to dictate organizational goals and strategies to the employer? The superintendent is accountable to the board of education, and the board of education is accountable to the community. As elected school system leaders, the BOE must inspire employees, not enable them. I am at a loss to understand why Howard County residents have been marginalized and neglected by the very BOE they elected.

An effective BOE functions through high-level oversight and guides comprehensive strategic planning. BOE members embrace their responsibility by holding the Superintendent accountable. However, the superintendent can only be accountable for the clear direction the BOE gives him or her. As an involved member of the public, I am unclear what direction, if any, the BOE gave to the superintendent. Renewing a superintendent's contract is a form of accountability.

I believed in Dr. Martirano when he was first hired. My question now is about his ability to be an effective school leader. I do not have enough information to know if the BOE provided Dr. Martirano with the expectations and tools he needed to perform the job we as a community expected him to perform. To that end, I am deeply troubled by Dr. Martirano's actions or lack thereof. However, there are at least two sides to every story, and I believe Dr. Martirano deserves an opportunity to explain why he should be considered for continued employment.

Given the catastrophic consequences of Dr. Martirano's actions on our community's sense of unity, I believe the opportunity for Dr. Martirano to justify his employment should be held with transparency. I would seek to hold a performance review in an open forum during which all members of the public would be allowed the opportunity to watch and listen. Moving forward, it should be the proactive of this BOE that all superintendent's performance reviews be made in public so that our community understands how effective our elected BOE members are at evaluating school performance.

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

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)

In short, absolutely not. HCPSS has massively failed on the promise and the requirement of providing a Free Appropriate Public Education to all children with disabilities. SPED parents and children have been regularly denied services and accommodations required under the law. There is a clear and documented history of Howard County Public School systemically discriminating against children with disabilities.

In recent years there have been significant improvements in special education at HCPSS, but we are so far behind that an incredible amount of work remains.

I sat in disbelief as I watched the BOE recently cut more than 25% of the proposed special education budget. This irresponsible action was taken despite the recent class-action grievance filed by special education staff at HCPSS. School personnel sat before the BOE and our community, and they tearfully detailed how overworked, understaffed, and ill-equipped they are to handle the children in our schools. There was no guessing about what needed to be fixed. The staff made it very clear to this BOE that something must change because children are needlessly suffering. The academic leadership team also pleaded with the BOE and explained that the proposed budget barely met the needs of our children, and many more resources were still needed. Despite the explicit and urgent cries for help need, the BOE inexplicably cut millions of dollars in teachers, curriculum, and support services from our most vulnerable students, and they did so at the expense of all Howard County families.

Special education, when provided through early intervention and delivered with laser precision by highly qualified and skilled educators, can change a child's future forever. Ironically, such an approach will also simultaneously decrease the overall cost of special education in Howard County. Unfortunately, that hope has once again been wiped out.

When this BOE cut services to our most at-risk children, they did not recommend reductions through efficiency. The BOE did not even recommend any efficiency reviews at all. Instead, the BOE marginalized the needs of our community, which will ultimately cost all of us much more in the long run.

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