

# Maryland Policy Report

No 2008-4

October 20, 2008

## QUESTIONS TO ASK BOARD OF EDUCATION CANDIDATES

BY TOM NEUMARK

AS THE ELECTION SEASON ENTERS FULL SWING THIS FALL, local Board of Education candidates across Maryland will present their platforms to the public, while local organizations will try to determine which candidate best supports their views. In most districts, candidates will receive questionnaires from the teachers' union, the local newspapers, and a few civic organizations, but not from rank-and-file parents. Most questionnaires ask candidates general questions such as: "Why are you running for Board of Education?"; "How would you rate the performance of the Superintendent?"; and, in the case of the union, whether the candidate is disposed to support the existing collective bargaining agreement.

Rarely do these questionnaires probe candidates' knowledge for the specifics of their education policy positions. Unfortunately for parents, who tend not to question candidates, a candidate's views on nuts-and-bolts issues—such as what type of math and reading programs the school system uses—have the greatest impact on their children's education.

Those important questions usually go unasked and should be posed to the candidates. This article offers a questionnaire that parents can use to better ascertain candidates' views on important issues that often do not get the attention they deserve. It also provides an answer guide to help clearly differentiate between education reformers and candidates who support the education status quo.

The questionnaire was actually used in Frederick County during the current election year. A group of parents, including the author of this article, formed a grass-roots advocacy organization called FrederickEducationReform.com out of concern over the direction of the school

system. The Frederick County candidates' responses to this questionnaire are posted on the group's web site, and reveal that many candidates lacked clear opinions and in some cases a startling lack of understanding of basic education terminology, such as the difference between a charter school and a school voucher.

Could this be the case in your district as well? Give candidates the following questionnaire and decide for yourself.

### **CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE, 2008 BOARD OF EDUCATION ELECTION<sup>1</sup>**

*Why Have a Questionnaire?* Some of the issues that are most important to us have not gotten the attention they deserve in previous elections. We believe that Board of Education members should be very knowledgeable about education policy and conduct substantive campaigns focused on important policy issues. This questionnaire is designed to identify candidates who understand education policy and want to make effective improvements to the education of our children.

**The Questions:** We have organized the questions into a number of categories below. Candidates are encouraged to take as much space as they need to answer them and to include research citations as they see fit. Candidates who would like further clarification or more information are encouraged to contact us.

### **ETHICS AND OPEN GOVERNMENT**

1. While Board members do not negotiate directly with the teachers' union, Board members are responsible

for directing the negotiating team that represents the Board in these negotiations. The Board establishes the parameters within which the Board's negotiating team may operate. These parameters include, but are not limited to, working conditions, salary, and available benefits. The teachers' union provides a great deal of political support to the candidates it favors. Do you believe it is a conflict of interest for Board of Education members to seek and accept the teachers' union endorsement? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would be concerned about having a conflict of interest by accepting the union's endorsement. The teacher's unions have often opposed important reforms such as school choice, differentiated salaries for teachers, and alternative certification. A good answer would acknowledge these facts in addition to taking the position that ethics demand that no Board of Education member should be beholden to the teachers' union or even create the appearance of impropriety that comes with seeking and accepting the union endorsement.*

2. Several school systems in other states have begun publishing their check register(s) monthly. As a Board member, would you work to establish a requirement that the public schools publish its check register(s) each month? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist on opening the books. Schools should have nothing to hide in terms of their expenses, and providing a detailed list of them will create more public confidence that our tax dollars are being well-spent. The cost of releasing this information is negligible, and several other systems have already done it, so candidates that suggest this is not feasible are in the status quo camp.*

3. We have suggested that the school system should include graphs that show ten-year trends in school spending, enrollment, and other categories as a part of its annual budget book. Would you work to require this information be published annually as a part of the budget book? If so, which categories should be included? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer realizes that in most districts the increase in spending has outstripped both inflation and student enrollment growth. Making trend data available as part of the annual budget book will help the public determine if school systems are managing budget growth appropriately. An education reformer would suggest placing limits on budget growth, limiting it to a fixed percentage, inflation growth, enrollment growth, or a combination of all three. A status quo candidate would avoid publicizing the data and not enforce specific limits on spending increases.*

## CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Maryland's Voluntary State Curriculum heavily influences the math standards of the local districts. Maryland's math standards have received a "C" rating by the Fordham Foundation, in part because the standards focus too much on non-essential topics instead of important pre-requisites for algebra. The National Math Panel recommended that curriculum standards should focus on a smaller number of standards that are learned in depth and mastered rather than a large number of topics that are touched on repeatedly in subsequent grade levels. As a Board member, would you put forth a legislative package that includes a bill to require the state to revise its math curriculum in this fashion, or insist that your district take it upon itself to do so? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist that students have the best math curriculum available, and would work to revise their local district's curriculum to be world-class even if doing so would require deviation from the Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum, which is, after all, voluntary. A status quo candidate would blame the state for problems in the local district's curriculum, or argue that no improvements were needed.*

## Schools should have nothing to hide in terms of their expenses, and providing a detailed list of them will create more public confidence that our tax dollars are being well-spent.

2. Parents across the country and state have protested "fuzzy math" programs that encourage non-standard ways of doing computation. "TERC Investigations" and "Everyday Math" are two such programs that are being used in Maryland districts, and they have been criticized for low standards and employing a trendy, unproven approach to teaching.<sup>2</sup> Would you work to replace these types of programs with mainstream, proven ones?

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would not approve these programs being used in their district, since most parents find them objectionable. A reformer would insist that parents be given the ability to choose the approaches used to teach their children. A status quo candidate would not be willing to question the central office staff at all or would conduct a tepid inquiry, instead valuing good relations with administrators over meeting the expectations of parents.*

3. The Reading Recovery program is not a scientifically based reading intervention and does not follow the recommendations of the National Reading Panel. It is also very expensive.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, it is used in some Maryland districts. Do you support the use of this program in your district? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist that students be taught using scientifically based reading instruction, which has been shown to reach 90-95 percent of students.<sup>4</sup> An education reformer would ask if the need for reading interventions pointed to problems in the main reading program, and would look toward proven reading programs that prevented student failure through ongoing data collection and corrections throughout the course of the school year, rather than wait until after they failed to implement a costly remediation program. A status quo candidate is unlikely to even be aware of the controversy surrounding Reading Recovery, and would likely insist that the local district is succeeding overall so no reconsideration is needed.*

4. Do you support reading programs that meet the criteria for scientifically-based reading instruction? Most districts employ a “balanced literacy” approach to reading instruction, but some scholars warn that quite a few programs that use that term may not be scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) standards.<sup>5</sup> Do you believe your district’s approach to reading meets SBRR standards? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist that top reading researchers who understand SBRR be hired to independently determine if their local district’s curriculum met SBRR standards. A status quo candidate might claim that “students learn differently” and that a “variety” of methods are needed, even though this “variety” of methods may not have been researched and proven to work and would fall short of SBRR.*

5. The social studies standards in many districts use the “expanding horizons” approach to teaching history, which holds that students should learn about their local communities (think trips to the police and fire station) but not teach about history on the basis that historical content is somehow “developmentally inappropriate.” As a result, elementary grades are vague and do not contain much history. Many important people, places and time periods, such as Ancient Greece and the Renaissance, are not mentioned in the K-5 standards. Would you work to have the elementary social studies standards revised to be more specific, and to include important people, places, and events that are currently missing? Please explain your views on the social studies standards.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist that important historical content be included in the elementary*

*grades and would know that top researchers recognize that no content is inherently developmentally inappropriate so long as it is taught in a way students can understand.<sup>6</sup> A status quo candidate would not want to make changes to the existing curriculum, believing that non-specific standards offer “flexibility” to teachers and that students will acquire “critical thinking” skills that are more important than specific content. An education reformer recognizes that students need to have basic knowledge in a subject to think critically about it, and that “flexibility” is a misleading term. Without being specific about what students should know and be able to do, schools will be unable to coordinate their efforts across grade levels and ensure all students are systematically exposed to interesting and important information they should learn.*

**An education reformer would insist that students be taught using scientifically based reading instruction, which has been shown to reach 90-95 percent of students.**

6. The current trend in science is “inquiry-based” teaching which tends to de-emphasize instruction from the teacher and encourage students to “discover” science concepts on their own.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, California’s science guide reads, “Some of the knowledge of science is best learned by having students read about the subject or hear about it from the teacher; other knowledge is best learned in laboratory or field studies. Direct instruction and investigative activities need to be mutually supportive and synergistic. Instructional materials need to provide teachers with a variety of options for implementation that are based on the science standards.” Would you work to revise your district’s approach to teaching science to take this balanced approach? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist on a balanced approach and would go beyond changing the wording of the science pedagogy guide to also fund professional development in science instruction that includes direct instruction and other teacher-led approaches. A status quo candidate would claim that the district already had a balanced approach, despite its own documentation that espouses an inquiry-based approach and the fact that most education schools emphasize this approach and give teacher-led approaches short shrift.*

7. Before answering this question, please read our briefing, “Myths About Teaching and Learning.”<sup>8</sup> Would you

work to provide teachers with professional development courses that present what mainstream research says about teaching and learning, and inform them about myths and misconceptions such as “learning styles,” “multiple intelligences,” “brain compatible instruction”, and “constructivism”? Please explain your views on the material presented in our briefing.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would work toward establishing professional development courses that were not the latest “flavor of the month” but that emphasize well-researched approaches resulting in significant improvements in student achievement. A status quo candidate may express agreement with some of the fads, which have a certain emotional appeal but little objective evidence behind them.*

8. Before answering this question, please read our briefing “Eliminating the Achievement Gap.”<sup>9</sup> What instructional or other approaches would you support to eliminate the achievement gap? For incumbents, what approaches have you implemented while on the Board and what evidence do you have that they have succeeded?

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would insist that proven approaches were used, and would look to programs with a strong track record such as the Baltimore Curriculum Project and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) to replicate in his or her district. A status quo candidate would likely support the current efforts to reduce the achievement gap, and would not consider school choice as a viable strategy toward that end.*

## SCHOOL CHOICE

1. Do you support charter schools? Please explain your views.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would strongly support charter schools, and would believe that parents have a fundamental right to choose where their children go to school. A status quo candidate would express skepticism about charter schools and may not understand that they are, in fact, public schools. An education reformer would insist that charter school receive the same amount of funding per pupil as the regular public schools. A status quo candidate may express concern that charter schools “drain resources” from the public schools, even though they simply move funds from one public school to another.*

2. Do you support school vouchers? Please explain your views.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would support school vouchers out of the belief that, as long as taxes are collected for the purpose of educating their children, parents should be able to choose where to send the funds*

*that would be spent on their child. A status quo candidate would believe that vouchers are not needed in successful districts and would misunderstand vouchers as a last resort for failing districts instead of a way to expand the choices available to parents that has nothing to do with how successful the district is. An education reformer would also support vouchers because they provide low-income students with the ability to choose schools they would otherwise not be able to attend. A reformer would point out that the public schools already send special education students whose needs cannot be met to private schools, and the same option should be available to all students.*

## An education reformer would also support vouchers because they provide low-income students with the ability to choose schools they would otherwise not be able to attend.

3. Do you support tax credits for parents whose children attend private schools? Please explain your views.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would support tax credits, since it is unfair to take money from parents for the sake of funding their children’s education, and then make them pay additional money to attend a private school. A status quo candidate would lose sight of the fact that taxpayer money is fundamentally theirs, and would argue that tax credits reduce funding for public education.*

## MISCELLANEOUS

1. Do you support alternative teacher certification? Would you work to adopt the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence’s Passport to Teaching program as an alternative route into the profession? Please explain.

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would support the American Board and other high quality alternative certification, since there is little evidence that the traditional route to certification is effective at differentiating between those who can teach and those who cannot.<sup>10</sup> A status quo candidate would oppose alternative teacher certification out of mistaken concern that it will negatively affect the image of teaching. An education reformer would point out that teachers are disproportionately drawn from the bottom third of college graduates, and high quality routes into the profession can actually increase the quality of the candidates.<sup>11</sup>*

2. According to the latest SOAR report, 30 percent of Maryland’s best students (those who take the college-

prep curriculum) need remediation in basic math once they get to college. Students without a college-prep background needed remediation at a rate of 41 percent.<sup>12</sup> Are you concerned with these remediation rates? What would you do to improve students' readiness for college level math?

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would express concern about this and would look to changes in curriculum and instruction to address the situation. A status quo candidate would argue that these percentages should not be concerning, despite the fact that the actual numbers may in fact be higher because they do not include students who are in courses like "College Algebra," which are remedial courses but not counted as such.*

3. What book or books have most influenced your thinking on education policy and why?

**Answer Guide:** *An education reformer would mention education reform books that talk about the fads in curriculum and instruction, a concern for the growth of school budgets, the barriers that keep too many talented people from becoming teachers, and above all else support for school choice through charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits. A status quo candidate might cite books that conclude that more money or community support is needed to improve education, instead of ones that focus on improving things over which the school system has direct control, namely who teaches, what and how they teach, and what choices are available for parents.*

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately parents, not the state of Maryland or local school districts, are responsible for ensuring that their

children become well-educated. The public schools often encourage parents to get involved, but that involvement usually manifests as classroom volunteering and PTA fundraising, not in the discussion of policy issues. This questionnaire is meant to provide parents with a tool that empowers them to ask important questions. After sending this questionnaire to candidates, parents who would like assistance interpreting or responding to the candidates' responses should feel free to contact the Maryland Public Policy Institute or the author of this paper for more information. Our hope is that parents, even those who may have an understandable lack of interest in politics, will consider taking us up on this offer out of interest and concern for their children.

**TOM NEUMARK** is a Visiting Fellow at the Maryland Public Policy Institute.

1. This questionnaire has been modified from the original to be applicable to all Maryland districts, not just Frederick County, and a few additional questions have been added as well.
2. For details see Bill Quirk, "TERC Hands-On Math: The Truth is in the Details," at <http://www.wgquirk.com/TERC.html>; and "Reviews of UCSMP Everyday Mathematics (University of Chicago School Mathematics Project Everyday Math)," at <http://www.nychold.com/em.html>.
3. See Melissa Farrall, Ph.D., "Reading Recovery: What do School Districts Get for Their Money?" at <http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/read.rr.research.farrall.htm>.
4. Statement, Dr. G. Reid Lyon, Chief, Child Development and Behavior Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, "Overview of Reading and Literacy Initiatives," for the Committee on Human and Labor Resources, Washington, D.C., at <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/nclb/lib/nclb/reid%20lyon%20statement.pdf>
5. Louisa Moats, "Whole Language High Jinks: How to Tell When "Scientifically-Based Reading Instruction" Isn't," at <http://edexcellence.net/doc/Moats2007.pdf>.
6. Daniel T. Willingham, "What is Developmentally Appropriate Practice?" in *American Educator*, Summer 2008, at [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/summer08/willingham.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer08/willingham.pdf).
7. "'Hands-On' vs. 'Minds-On' in Science," at <http://www.illinoisloop.org/scienceconstruct.html>.
8. Located under the "Briefings" link at [www.FrederickEducationReform.com](http://www.FrederickEducationReform.com).
9. Located under the "Briefings" link at <http://www.FrederickEducationReform.com>.
10. Kate Walsh, "Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality," The Abell Foundation, 2001, at [http://www.nctq.org/p/publications/docs/ed\\_cert\\_1101\\_20071129024241.pdf](http://www.nctq.org/p/publications/docs/ed_cert_1101_20071129024241.pdf).
11. "The Teacher Certification Debate: Certified and Qualified are Not the Same," The Center for Education Reform, *CER Action Paper*, April 25, 2003, at <http://www.edreform.com/index.cfm?fuseAction=document&documentID=1140>.
12. "College Performance of New Maryland High School Graduates: Student Outcome and Achievement Report," Maryland Higher Education Commission, October 2006, at <http://www.mhec.state.md.us/publications/research/AnnualReports/2006SOAR.pdf>.

### **ABOUT THE MARYLAND PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE**

Founded in 2001, the Maryland Public Policy Institute is a nonpartisan public policy research and education organization that focuses on state policy issues. Our goal is to provide accurate and timely research analysis of Maryland policy issues and market these findings to key primary audiences.

The mission of the Maryland Public Policy Institute is to formulate and promote public policies at all levels of government based on principles of free enterprise, limited government, and civil society.

In order to maintain objectivity and independence, the Institute accepts no government funding and does not perform contract research. The Maryland Public Policy Institute is recognized as a 501 (C) (3) research and education organization under the Internal Revenue Code.