



# Chinese American Parent Associate – Montgomery County (CAPA-MC) Board of Education Candidates Forum 2016

On October 7, 2016, Chinese American Parent Associate – Montgomery County (CAPA-MC) held a community forum for all six Board of Education candidates (Anjali Reed Phukan, Shebra Evans, Phil Kauffman, Jeanette Dixon, Rebecca Smondrowski, and Brandon Rippeon). The forum served as a bridge for the candidates to communicate their platform and priorities to mainly Chinese American parents. Below are a summary of their responses to CAPA-MC and audience’s questions.

## CAPA-MC Prepared Questions:

1. In a recent article in Bethesda Magazine entitled “*Still the Best?*” it asked whether MCPS is still the best school system. It went on to suggest that our neighboring Howard County is “knocking on our door” and this has important implications for our students and also our communities and local economy including housing prices. If elected as BOE member, what are your top three priorities to keep MCPS the best school system? Why and how did you select these priorities?

### **Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan’s platform is living, loving, and learning. She thought that the biggest issue facing Montgomery County is addiction. Addiction problem is crippling communities in the County, and is preventing students from achieving their full potential.

In terms of loving, Ms. Phukan thought that schools should be safe and loving place for everyone. Addiction recovery and support for those who were bullied should be a top priority.

In terms of learning, Ms. Phukan thought that motivation is key. Students should have something to look forward to when they come to class, whether it is simply hot meals or



challenging curriculum. In addition, Ms. Phukan thought that MCPS look into online learning and expanding after school programs.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans thought that community engagement and partnership, equity and fiscal responsibility should be top priorities. Mrs. Evans also thought that community engagement is important. Community should have input to conversations and decision making of MCPS. Parents and communities should have the opportunity to provide input and heads-up before decisions are made.

Mrs. Evans also thought that equal is not necessary better, and that MCPS needs to make sure that every school is prepared to better serve their unique student populations.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman did not agree with premise of the Bethesda Magazine article. He thought that MCPS were flat funded in previous years, and it impacted its means to deal with a diverse student body and increasing enrollments.

Mr. Kauffman thought that the Board of Education should review MCPS's budget outlay, and determine if MCPS strategies and programs are effective. The Board of Education should also look at new strategies to meet MCPS's current and future needs.

Lastly, Mr. Kauffman thought that MCPS should expand career programs offerings to our students. This is to ensure that all of our students are well-prepare for the future and have multiple career pathways.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon thought that MCPS should also be good stewards of \$2.65 billion that taxpayers have provided. Board of Education should review all of MCPS programs and gauge their effectiveness, and adjust accordingly. MCPS should also strive to limit class size.

In addition, Ms. Dixon thought the Board of Education should proactively address MCPS's challenges instead of reacting to challenges.

Lastly, Ms. Dixon thought the Board of Education and MCPS should prioritize engaging communities in its decision making process.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**



Mrs. Smondrowski echoed with what other candidate's comments. Board of Education should look into the return on investment on various MCPS programs, improving career readiness of students, and ensuring opportunities for all students. Mrs. Smondrowski also thought that community discussion, communication, and outreach are important as well.

Lastly, Mrs. Smondrowski concurred with other candidates that the Board of Education members ought to make sure MCPS is a good steward of the taxpayer money and ensure that programs are indeed effective.

**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon thought that fiscal responsibility, budget transparency, and raising academic standards should be the top priorities for the Board of Education. He believes the State's audit reveal serious problem with how MCPS uses its funds i.e. 20% of the bus routes are at 50% occupancy or less. He also believes that the Board of Education should focus on how to raise the academic standards and our expectation for MCPS students.

Lastly, Mr. Rippeon thought that the Board of Education should look into expanding vocational training and internship.



2. In a recent report released by Thomas B. Fordham Institute, it stated that Maryland’s school accountability system “forces schools to focus on its lowest performing students, while the high achievers are largely ignored.” It suggests that an accountability system to look at how much academic growth ALL students are making in a year of schooling. What will you do to make schools accountable for the growth of ALL students, especially the ones who have are already at the proficient or advanced level of their grade?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan recounted her experience as a Special Education student. As a Special Ed Student, she received an IEP (Individualized Education Program). It was an individualized program that followed her through her MCPS career. The IEP focused on Ms. Phukan’s needs Ms. Phukan thought that every students should receive individualized education to some degree.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans shared her experience as co-lead in the African American Student Achievement Action group (SAA), and described how the SAA talked to MCPS to eliminate opportunity gap. In response, MCPS created an Associate Superintendent position specifically to monitor equity and making certain that MCPS schools are doing their all on equity.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman share his experience from previous year when the Board of Education had a board meeting regarding GT programming. The Board found that many advanced students are not served by the GT programming. Mr. Kauffman thought that in order to make schools accountable for the growth of proficient/advanced students, a system is needed to monitor Gifted & Talented and other advanced students’ performance first.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon thought the Board should strive to keep academic standard high and provide support for students who are not performing as well. To keep schools accountable, Ms. Dixon concurred with the Superintendent’s recent report to the Board of Education that student performance should be review at each quarter (instead of end of year) and provide support as needed. Ms. Dixon also thought that the teacher in the classroom should have a connection with the students.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**



Mrs. Smondrowski thought that the Board should charge the MCPS Superintendent with ensuring that every child has access to rigorous and accelerated curriculum. She thought that the Board should change the exam process to ensure that student progress is tracked every quarter. The Board should also ensure that the teachers are adequately trained and the knowledge to teach rigorous and accelerated curriculums.

**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon thought that we should focused on updating curriculum for advanced students, The Board should look to challenge advanced students further. He also disagrees with the incumbent Board’s decisions to “lower standards and expectations”.



3. The recent Metis Choice Report generated heated debates in MCPS community. Many feel that the gifted and talented programs in the county need to be expanded. Parents are also concerned about the selecting criteria change and the transparency of the selecting process. If elected, how will you support making the selection criteria more clear and the selection process more transparent?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan believes that parents, MCPS, and students should have a say in what Choice programs are offered. The Board should also review the applicants to Magnet and HGC programs to see where their interests are (“geeking on”), and offer programs that matches these interests if they are not currently offered.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans thought the issue is more about opportunity and access. At the end of the day, it’s about how do we (as a community) make MCPS schools stronger and make parents become aware of their children’s talents are. Mrs. Evans also thought that communication is also key to the selection process. Many parents seem to be unaware of some of these programs and how to apply. Communication is key to resolving this.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman thought that actual selection process should be to a Board decision, and that it should be fully and openly discussed with the community. Recommendation and any decisions on changes to the program should be open to the community for review and comment.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon thought that MCPS and the Board should operate on total transparency. In terms of choice program, The Board and MCPS should expand the choice programs and not pit groups of student against each other. Ms. Dixon also thought that it was really important to do universal screening of students. She thought that the fairest way is to formulate a determined set of criteria, and let students who hit that mark into the Choice programs.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski thought that the Board and MCPS should absolutely increase the number of offerings for Gifted & Talented (GT) students. The Board and MCPS should support in



continuously look for children of various gift and talent, and help parents with the application process.

**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon believes in total transparency especially in GT and Choice program selections. He also thought that GT and Choice program selection process should be merit based, and that the Board and MCPS should expand the Choice program offerings. Mr. Rippeon is against lowering standards and expectations for GT students



4. Diversity of MCPS Teacher and Administration Workforce – Recent reports showed that among MCPS teaching staff--75% are White, 11.5% are African American and Latinos are about 7%. Asian American educators are severely underrepresented in MCPS’ professional workforce and very few administrators in Principal position or above director levels are Asian Americans. Would you be committed to increase the representation of Asian Americans in MCPS’ professional workforce and administration rank? If yes, what is your plan?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan thought that MCPS has too many substitute teachers and the Board and MCPS should consider ways to make them full part of the schools where they teach.

In addition, Ms. Phukan thought that the Board and MCPS should consider placing bilingual advertisement in ethnic marketplace, and reduce the central office overhead.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans stated she is a big supporter of diversity and that she is interested in making the MCPS workforce reflect the ethnic makeup of Montgomery County. She also thought that outreach and community engagement via community organizations such as CAPA-MC is important to the process of increasing Asian American representation in MCPS’s workforce.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman agreed with what other candidates said. He also added that the issue comes back to the priorities of the Board. The Board can charge the Superintendent and the Human Resource to come up with the plan to increase Asian American representation and implement it.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon shared her experience while she was a principal in MCPS. She advocated for the Asian American teachers and principals in her time at White Oaks Middle School and Paint Branch High School. Ms. Dixon was also the first principal to hire Asian American teacher counselor, and administrator.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski stated that she is committed to increasing diversity of MCPS central office and the administrative workforce. She worked with the Chief Operating Officer to create a program called STEP (Student to Teaching Education Program). This program helps



students take pride in the teaching profession and develop the skills necessary for this profession.

**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon thought that Montgomery County's Chinese American community is an untapped resource to improve MCPS. He thought that it was important advocate for higher pay for educators and that MCPS's workforce should reflect the ethnic makeup of this county



5. **School Finance:** Families living in Montgomery County keep an keen eye on the strength of our school system. This year county residents are doing their part of keeping our schools great by paying 8.7% more on property tax. If elected, how will you advocate for allocation of more state funding and what creative ways do you have to find other revenue options.

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan thought that the Board and MCPS should advocate for more allocation from revenues generated by Maryland's casinos. She also thought that the Board and MCPS should explore more options to land Federal funding.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans thought relationship with State legislators and local officials are crucial in currying additional funding from the State. In addition, representation in the decision making process, such as participating in the County's Budget Steering Committee should be pursued. Private partnership should be considered where possible.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman explained that how much State funding each county gets is determined from a formula. The allocation is based on the wealth of the county and other factors. Currently, there is a commission looking to revise the formula. Montgomery County's Board of Education has representation in this commission. Mr. Kauffman also stated that Maryland Association of Board of Education has a panel that provides recommendation to the State as to how to allocate resource more fairly. He is part of that panel.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon thought that it is important to have good relationship with our state legislator so that they will advocate for Montgomery County in Annapolis. Relationship with the governor is important as well. She also thought that the Board and MCPS also should be good stewards of taxpayer funds and look at return on investment.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski thought that the Board should be vigilant to ensure the MCPS is making decision finance wise. She also stated that relationship with various State legislator and administrator is important as well.



**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon thought that more spending does not necessarily equate to better education. The taxpayer is pushed to the breaking point. He thought that the Board should review MCPS's budget from top to bottom. Mr. Rippeon thought that the Board should adopt the State's audit of MCPS and its recommendations. He also stated that he will work with State legislators to acquire more state support.



6. The Asian American minority group has a distinct cultural heritage and history in this country. For our younger generation to grow up feeling self-confident and accepted, we believe that our culture and history need to be acknowledged, respected, and taught in school. We found that in, in MCPS Middle School social studies or high school history classes on Asian American history and culture, currently, there are very limited materials on Asian American Culture, and very limited time are spent on them, even though Asian American students count for 14%~15% of the MSCP student population. How can we integrated more Asian American history and culture content in our curriculum? How can we increase the Asian American cultural proficiency among MCPS staff?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan thought the Board should look at who we are as a county when we teach our history. As demographic changes, the Board and MCPS should be more mindful and evaluate how we teach that. Additional bilingual and electives classes will help toward this end.

She also thought that teachers from foreign countries can share their unique perspectives and enrich students' lives.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans thought that diversification of workforce and administrators are important toward this end.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman thought that he learned something from the question that he was not aware of. One of the roles of the Board is to adopt MCPS's curriculum. Periodically, curriculum comes to the Board for review. Mr. Kauffman thought this questions raise an important issue in that the Board and MCPS should look to integrate more cultural awareness into our curriculum.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon would like to see student exchanges between Chinese schools and MCPS. In addition, she thought that the Board and MCPS should do more to celebrate Asian & Pacific Island Heritage month.

Lastly, Ms. Dixon also support making Chinese Lunar New Year a school holiday

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski also supported the idea of student exchanges.



In additional, she thought that the expansion of dual language programs should enable students and parents to learn and understand other cultures.

Lastly, she acknowledged that there is an underrepresentation of Asian American in decision making/advisory panels, and that the Board and MCPS need to work to change that.

**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon's experience taught him that much can be learned from different cultures. In the public libraries, we do have a large collection in Chinese and other languages. I think we can emulate this at the MCPS. These cultures and history are important and should be taught.

## Questions from Audience

1. Census data shows that Montgomery County has 15%, what your opinion on promoting lunar New Year as a holiday?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan supports promoting lunar New Year as a holiday.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans definitely will consider it. She thought that the Board and MCPS should definitely celebrate our communities.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman thought that it is definitely worth considering, but the Board will have to take into account of Governor Hogan's order, as MCPS is already hard pressed with school calendar.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon also support making Chinese Lunar New Year a holiday

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski too support it if the school calendar allows. She reiterated that Governor Hogan's Executive Order on school start date is making this difficulty

Mrs. Smondrowski thought that if Year round school offering is available, it may provide more opportunities to honor more holidays.



**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon agreed with his fellow candidates. The Board should take every opportunity to do, but should be cognizant of calendar restraint as well.



2. With increasing enrollment at over 2,000 a year, many schools are overcrowded, if elected, how will you set funding priority to address this overcrowding issue?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan thought that the Board and MCPS should look at alternative schooling and outside of the school walls. Support for online courses and home schooling should be considered.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans thought that community engagement and communication is key. Conversation between stakeholders should be initiated early on to figure out how to plan for this.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman stated that unfortunately the Board and MCPS do not have adequate resources to completely address the issue. He thought that development and planning policies should be review in conjunction with MCPS actions.

Mr. Kauffman explained that housing moratorium at currently set at 120% of school capacity. He proposed the Board that this number should be reduced to 110%. The County Council is currently looking at that. We need to look for additional funding from developers working in Montgomery County as well..

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon agreed that the developer should contribute more. In addition, Serious, transparent discussion should be held between the County Council, Board of Education, and the developers on to resolve this issue.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski thought the Board need to work closely with the County's Planning Board and enforce the housing moratorium.

**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon though that the County needs a comprehensive solution. The Board needs to engage the County Executive and developers need to pay their fair shares. The Board also needs to do a better job at managing taxpayer money



3. Mental health: Last year, our community lost a couple students due to depression and other mental health issue. How will you help our students with the pressure of everyday life and schooling?

**Anjali Reed Phukan (District 4):**

Ms. Phukan thought that recovery support and interpersonal skill development are key to helping students. Students need to feel unembarrassed when seeking help.

**Shebra Evans (District 4):**

Mrs. Evans thought that ideally, we should have health and wellness centers in our schools. However, in the meantime, the Board and MCPS should increase the number of counselors and school psychologist. Public forums should be held for parents to bring issues to light as well.

**Phil Kauffman (At Large):**

Mr. Kauffman thought that this is a serious problem. He thought that MCPS needs to step up its services to students on mental health. MCPS should better train teachers to identify students who are suffering, and referring them to counselor and school psychologist.

**Jeanette Dixon (At Large):**

Ms. Dixon thought that it was vitally important to increase mental health personnel and their say in the matter. School psychologist should not just test kids for placements, but also actively engage kids and parents as well. Additional psychiatrist and counselor should also be hired as well. Currently, the counselor to student ration is too high.

**Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2):**

Mrs. Smondrowski stated that mental health is an area that she is passionate about. She currently works with School Family Justice center and Student Government to bring awareness to the issue of mental health. MCPS should do better job at identifying concerns and monitor social media for cyber bullying

She also agrees with the notion that more school counselors and psychologists are needed. Students should know that they have someone to talk to.



**Brandon Rippeon (District 2):**

Mr. Rippeon thought that we should engage the County and seek assistance from County's Health and Human Services. He thought that the removal of stigma from mental health is key to resolving this issue.