

Howard County Board of Education Candidate Questions & Answers 2022

EXPERIENCE

Are you a PTA member? What role do you see PTAs having in education?

Linfeng Chen:

Yes, I am PTA members at each of the three schools my children attend: Hammond Elementary School, Hammond Middle School, and Reservoir High School. PTAs are extremely valuable to schools and education. PTAs create a village that supports our kids, strengthens our community, connects families to school and community information, and organizes fun educational clubs, programs, and events (teacher appreciation week, fall fun run, fall, and spring festivals) for our families. PTAs raise money and call volunteers to support the specific needs of our school. They are the foundation for parent-teacher-community partnerships. However, Covid damaged many PTAs, and we now need to build back the strength of our PTAs, as they are essential for many school-based activities and for students' academic success.

Jacky McCoy:

I have been a member of the PTA and PTSA when my children were in the schools. While I follow what is going on in my grandchildren's schools, I am not currently a member of their PTA. I see PTAs and PTSAs playing a critical role in helping to ensure real involvement of parents and guardians in their children's education. Many PTAs and PTSAs also recognize the importance of standing up for all of the children in their school communities and are active voices on behalf of those children before the Board of Education and other elected officials.

How many BOE meetings have you attended/watched?

Linfeng Chen:

I have attended numerous BOE meetings since 2014. I testified in front of the BOE at least five times in addition to organizing a Youth Ambassadors Program and facilitating students to testify in front of the BOE on topics such as school traffic, cafeteria food quality, food waste, and reducing plastic usage at schools. The virtual meeting option during Covid made BOE meetings more accessible and I watched most BOE meetings this year.

Jacky McCoy:

I can't recall the number, but I have been successful in testifying before the board. As a result of my testimony, the 4 x 4 scheduling that used to exist at Long Reach High School and I believe River Hill was changed to align with the scheduling of the other high schools in the system. Also, my testimony regarding the 3-credit requirement for high school math was changed to a 4-credit requirement to better support students.

What decisions by the current Board would you have decided differently, if any?

Linfeng Chen:

Although it was the County Executive's decision, I think the Board should not have agreed to remove SROs from middle schools. With so many incidents this year, we need SROs to make our schools safe so that students can focus on academics and learning.

Jacky McCoy:

The 2019 redistricting solution was clearly poorly executed and problematic. There was not enough consideration for the impact of the decision on the students and staff. At any point when redistricting is required, centering the welfare and needs of students, staff, and families must be a major focus.

Have you served on a HCPSS policy committee before? If so, what committee, and what was your contribution?

Linfeng Chen:

No. I have not served on a HCPSS policy committee before. However, I served on the HCPSS Operating Budget Review Committee (OBRC), Science Advisory Committee, Social Studies Advisory Committee, and School Calendar Committee. If the opportunity arises, I will serve on a HCPSS Policy Committee.

Jacky McCoy:

I was a member of the Board of Education Citizen Advisory Council (now Community Advisory Council). I served on a school calendar committee and school scheduling committee.

What external BOE appointment position would you want to serve on and why?

Linfeng Chen:

I would like to serve on the Howard County Spending Affordability Advisory Committee. It is critical to align the HCPSS budget with the County Budget and advocate that more than 50% of the County budget is allocated to HCPSS.

Jacky McCoy:

I am open to serving where I can contribute best. I plan to visit as many schools as possible in order to keep my commitment to center the children and their families in all decisions that I make as a board member.

What recent decision has the current Board made that you would have supported?

Linfeng Chen:

I support the BOE's decision to make school redistricting for HS#13 limited in scope instead of a County-wide redistricting. I believe that redistricting should only be used to address school capacity issues in a manner that is least disruptive to students. The Board's decision is in alignment with my position. I also support the BOE's decision on school start times. It is critical to address high school start times, especially in light of the possibility of making Daylight Saving Time permanent.

Jacky McCoy:

No answer.

Do you view the at-large position differently than the newer district representative positions? If yes, then how so?

Linfeng Chen:

Yes, the at-large position represents the whole County and his/her decisions have to reflect the needs of all students and families in the entire County. My tenure on the Board of Education will be marked by serving as the Board Member that seeks out and listens to concerns, recommendations, suggestions, and encouragement from the entire County: parents, teachers, students, guardians, grandparents, and other County residents. All these people should have a voice. That is my campaign slogan: Better Education for All, Vote for Chen!

Jacky McCoy:

Yes, I view the at-large seat differently. The position requires broad focus, not just a particular district.

Have you ever served a role in a union negotiation?

Linfeng Chen:

No.

Jacky McCoy:

No.

Do you have experience in human resources conflict mediation?

Linfeng Chen:

I do not have any experience in human resources conflict mediation. However, I believe that I possess the skills necessary to be successful in this arena. I would listen to all parties and summarize the conflict in a neutral manner, focus on issues instead of people, lay out options, and explore solutions that work for all parties.

Jacky McCoy:

No.

Have you testified (either in person or by written testimony) on any topic impacting HCPSS? If so, when did you testify and what was topic?

Linfeng Chen:

I testified at least five times. I testified in 2014, 2015, and 2021 to support the school calendar in accommodating major ethnic holidays using professional learning days. In 2020 I also testified to expanding the world language program to cover a wider variety of languages. In 2021 I testified regarding adding Asian American studies to the school curriculum. Last May I sent my written testimony to the County Council to fully fund HCPSS FY23 Superintendent Proposed School Budget.

Jacky McCoy:

As a result of my testimony, the 4 x 4 scheduling that used to exist at Long Reach High School and I believe River Hill was changed to align with the scheduling of the other high schools in the system. Also, my testimony regarding the 3-credit requirement for high school math was changed to a 4-credit requirement to better support students.

Developer influence is a big concern for many in the community. Community advocacy groups have put together the "Howard County No Developer No Dark Money Pledge." Have you signed it? If not, why not?

Linfeng Chen:

Yes, I am very proud to make the Howard County No Developer No Dark Money Pledge. Developer money has contributed to HCPSS school overcrowding.

Jacky McCoy:

I have not signed the pledge as I see that it could lead to the very thing that the pledge seeks to eliminate. I am a person of integrity and have a clear understanding of outside influence. I do not intend to take money from developers, nor will I be influenced by developers. I will be looking for contributions from individuals associated with developers and intend to return any I receive. My decisions as a BOE member will be driven by what is best for students, educators, and families, not developers.

BOARD RELATIONS

Our current Board is often divided on several issues. What will you do to build consensus with Board members even on issues that you all may not agree on?

Linfeng Chen:

The current Board has diverse viewpoints that reflect the diversity of viewpoints in Howard County. It is normal to have different opinions on complicated issues. Board Members may have good intentions but differ in their means to achieve a goal. It is critical to understand each other's perspective, present our own perspective and rationale authentically, and seek common ground. Board Members must come to agreements in the best interest of all students through communications and mutual acceptance of terms even if they deviate from the original goal or desire.

Jacky McCoy:

As part of my work in Changing the Lens, I seek to listen and find common ground as we have discussions within our workshops. Building consensus requires openness to the ideas of others and finding common ground. I will apply that approach as I work with the board.

STUDENT QUESTION

How much weight will you give to student feedback on budget prioritization?

Linfeng Chen:

The Board should listen to all voices on budget recommendations, including those from students. However, I think the current voting right for SMOB is enough and that SMOB should not vote on budgetary issues, which can be extremely complicated.

Jacky McCoy:

I will always consider student feedback.

OPERATING BUDGET

HCPSS currently faces a \$71 million deficit between what the Board proposed and what the County Executive has proposed – what would you cut? What revenue source would need to be leveraged otherwise?

Linfeng Chen:

We need to bridge the gap from both ends. The requested HCPSS budget needs to reflect the fiscal reality of Howard County, which is getting more mature with less growth projected over the next decade and which has the highest tax among neighboring counties. The HCPSS annual budget increase should match the County revenue increase. The HCPSS budget should be used wisely and should prioritize academic performance and classroom instruction over transportation and devices. I would cut transportation, devices, and utilities. The transportation routes can be optimized to support neighborhood schools and save money for classrooms. 1:1 student and device ratio with 20% spare is not necessary at the elementary school level for in-person instruction considering we will not go back to full virtual instruction. More energy efficient systems (solar power, adiabatic cooling) should be used to save on utilities in the long term.

At the County level, HCPSS should maintain 50% or more of the County operating budget considering the vast number of school buildings, employees, and families associated with the school system. The percentage of the County budget allocated to HCPSS should be higher than it is currently.

Jacky McCoy:

I will refrain from commenting on this year's budget as it is a hypothetical with many details. Each year the Board faces choices about how to spend the money that is allocated. My priorities in addressing budget gaps will be to center the children and our staff in every decision.

What is the largest budget that you have had a role in authorizing?

Linfeng Chen:

I had control of the budget of \$0.5 Million as a Member of the Board of Directors for Howard County Chinese School. Additionally, as a principal engineer, I frequently contributed to multi-million-dollar projects with global team members (North America, APAC, EMEA, Latin America). Finally, although not directly authorizing the budget, I have also served on the HCPSS Operating Budget Review Committee, which has made me very familiar with the HCPSS budget of \$1 Billion dollars.

Jacky McCoy:

No answer.

How will you work with the new County Executive and County Council to increase funding for the school system?

Linfeng Chen:

The first role is to accurately explain the needs of the school system in such a way as it translates into funding to achieve the school system goals. The Board of Education must be able to justify its request for funding. They must be active overseers of that funding, ensuring taxpayer dollars are used appropriately, not wastefully, and are benefitting the educational requirements of the student citizens of the County. The BOE is the conduit for moving educational funding into acquired knowledge for students and the conduit for turning educational needs into requests for funding. Currently, the Board of Education meets quarterly with the County Council. These meetings should be productive with the aim of effectively sharing the status and needs of the school system. If the meetings are productive, the County Council should have all the information they need to make decisions to fund HCPSS.

Jacky McCoy:

I will work in a collaborative way with both the County Executive and the County Council.

What legislation do you support that helps to fund HCPSS?

Linfeng Chen:

I support HB1450. This house bill holds the MOE constant year over year for FY 2023, which can minimize the impact of the drop in public school enrollment on the school budget.

Jacky McCoy:

Yes. The National Association of Realtors currently prohibits agents from referencing school districts in home sales.

CAPITAL BUDGET

Do you support putting High School 14 in Elkridge? If so, what will you do to move it forward on the CIP (Capital Improvement Plan)?

Linfeng Chen:

Yes, I am in support of putting HS#14 in Elkridge. The Route 1 corridor has a lot of dense development. When we put new schools where they are needed, we can reduce transportation costs and save students transportation time. I will prioritize HS#14 in Elkridge on the CIP.

Jacky McCoy:

I will support the best location as the data indicates along with what is best for students.

What would be your plan for dealing with the millions in deferred maintenance?

Linfeng Chen:

Maintenance should not be deferred. Doing so will likely end up costing more money in the long run and can result in safety issues. Buildings and mechanics need attention on a regular basis. I would request the Superintendent provide a maintenance schedule for all schools and I would vote to see this maintenance fully funded in the budget.

Jacky McCoy:

As a member of the board, I will look for every possible way to address funding for deferred maintenance.

Welcome to Oakland Mills! As I assume you are aware, Oakland Mills High School has been bumped down or off the priority list for repairs and renovations many times. We have a great community here at OMHS. Will you work to get OMHS's renovations and repairs moved up in the capitol budget plan so that our facility is upgraded to appropriate/modern standards as soon as possible?

Linfeng Chen:

Yes, we have to invest in our school infrastructure as soon as possible, including investing in the necessary renovations and repairs at Oakland Mills High School. Investing in our school infrastructure requires us to expand current school capacities to address school overcrowding issues and repair/upgrade the schools as planned. Students deserve a safe learning environment.

Jacky McCoy:

I will work to get OMHS the renovations and repairs that it needs.

There will always be a challenge to provide enough seats at our schools. How will you ensure that older schools like OMHS are not bypassed and allowed to continue to decline?

Linfeng Chen:

We should reduce temporary classrooms and increase brick and mortar classrooms to address school overcrowding and reduce redistricting frequency. We can expand existing schools vertically or add permanent additions horizontally. Wilde Lake Middle School is a great modern two-story urban school design model. We must make infrastructure investment a priority and seek capital investment. If a complete rebuild is not possible, regular maintenance and repair are critical to extend the life of an older school like OMHS and provide a safe learning environment.

Jacky McCoy:

As previously stated, I will work to get OMHS the renovations and repairs that it needs. Unfortunately, we are at a point where many of our schools are aging. It is critical that we address their needs.

Should school planning extend 5, 10, 25, 50 years into the future with research done into where population centers and schools should be within the county?

Linfeng Chen:

School planning needs to include a short-term plan for 5 years and a long-term plan for 10 years. Any school planning over 10 years may not make sense because so many parameters change over a 10-year period.

Jacky McCoy:

Right now, we have a 30-year plan for Downtown Columbia and school planning is a part of that. However, as we execute on that plan, we can already see that priorities and needs are evolving. So, while planning 10 or even 25 years may be warranted, planning 50 years into the future is probably a bit ambitious.

Do you think relocatable portable classrooms are a solution to school overcrowding?

Linfeng Chen:

No, relocatable portables are not safe under extreme weather conditions, such as the weather events on 5/16/2022, or under lock down situations. Additionally, the relocatable classrooms do not have bathrooms and can have health hazards like mold.

Jacky McCoy:

No.

What role will you play in constituent advocacy for state matching funding?

Linfeng Chen:

I will be a vocal advocate in securing state matching funds. Howard County should get a fair share of state support in Blueprint and other state education initiatives.

Jacky McCoy:

I will play whatever role that I can play as a member of the board to advocate for state funding.

Which advising entity is the most and the least influential to you offering school construction prioritization adjustments?

Linfeng Chen:

PTACHC is the most influential to me because it has large representatives from every school across the County. The members are very active and well informed. Howard County Association Of Supervisors And Administrators (HCASA) is the least influential to me.

Jacky McCoy:

I will base my decisions regarding school construction on what is best for students first and foremost.

What is your plan for making sure the county has an adequate number of schools?

Linfeng Chen:

The best way to address overcrowding in schools is to expand school capacity locally, i.e., building new schools like HS#13 or expanding existing schools. We should add permanent additions or add new schools using two-story urban school designs similar to Wilde Lake Middle School. I will closely follow the capital budget for the upcoming fiscal year, a five-year capital improvement program, and a ten-year long-range master plan to determine priorities.

Jacky McCoy:

As a member of the Board of Education, my job will be to deal with the capacity issues we are currently seeing and to work to help ensure we don't continue to have these issues in the future. We need to find creative ways to build capacity beyond just building new schools. At the same time, I believe we should be ensuring that the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) is applied with fidelity, and that we work to improve coordination between government organizations to proactively ensure we don't have overcrowding at individual schools.

REDISTRICTING

When making redistricting decisions, how would you rank the three factors identified in Policy 6010- facility utilization, community stability, and demographic characteristics of the student population? Which one is the most important and which one is the least important?

Linfeng Chen:

Facility utilization is the most important, closely followed by community stability, with the demographic characteristics of the student population being the least important.

Jacky McCoy:

My decisions regarding redistricting will be guided by what is best for students in reference to all three factors.

What data points would you consider when redistricting?

Linfeng Chen:

I believe that redistricting should only be used to address school capacity issues in a manner that is least disruptive to students. The central data point should be school capacity, i.e., seats available. It is also important to have data points such as keeping those students who can walk to school as walkers instead of wasting transportation dollars to transport them to distant schools.

Jacky McCoy:

A wide range of data need to be considered when conducting redistricting in accordance with HCPSS Policy 6010, including capacity data, transportation information, demographics, feed information, past redistricting impacts, and much more.

Would you prefer to continue outsourcing redistricting guidance on a case-by-case basis, or develop a longer term in-house analytical capability?

Linfeng Chen:

We should develop redistricting in house, as it is not high-tech and does not require special expertise. It may be easy to shift the blame to the outsourced contractor if anything goes wrong, but HCPSS knows the process the best and has the experience to successfully implement redistricting plans. HCPSS should direct the money from the outside redistricting contractors to the classrooms where it belongs.

Jacky McCoy:

Whether it is in-house or outsourced, that should be long term planning for redistricting.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

What is your understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

Linfeng Chen:

IDEA is the federal law that requires HCPSS to provide an education tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities. Failure to adhere to the law as written can result in poor education for an individual student and necessarily subjects HCPSS to a lawsuit by parents or guardians.

Jacky McCoy:

The IDEA provides “free appropriate public education to and ensures special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities.” As a teacher, I have first-hand experience with what this really means and how challenging it is to provide adequate services for every child.

Can you describe the IEP process and the BOE’s r**Linfeng Chen:**

Individual Education Program (IEP) refers to both the special educational program provided to a child with a disability under the federal IDEA law and to the written document that describes that educational program, including accommodations and objectives. It is created through a team including the child's parent(s) and district personnel who know about the child’s needs. The BOE has an important role to address concerns from parents and teachers and to provide proper funding to meet the legal requirements and ensure successful implementation.

Jacky McCoy:

The IEP process does not include school board members, but it is the Board of Education’s responsibility to help ensure that the school system is held accountable for executing the IEP process appropriately for each of our students.

How would you increase support services for those students who have IEPs?**Linfeng Chen:**

HCPSS should address staff shortage in special education. We should mandate a better salary and benefits in addition to offering more training to the temporary employees hired.

Jacky McCoy:

As appropriate, I would consider the input from parents, students, and service providers in the school system. In particular, having real engagement and input from families could help us direct resources to addressing the most critical needs for these students.

Many teachers are publicly stating significant problems in special education. What can the Board of Education do to improve besides additional funding?**Linfeng Chen:**

We should reduce the overwhelming paperwork and bureaucracy faced by these teachers while still ensuring the legal requirements are met. Documentation should be placed in an electronic system that is secure and protected, but with easy access for use in evaluation of the student’s placement and progress. All special educators should have immediate access to communication equipment so they can readily ask for more support in any emergency situation. The school system should frequently seek the feedback from special education staff members to make continuous improvements to the program.

Jacky McCoy:

The board is a source of accountability. As a board member, I would work to ensure that we are listening to the concerns of staff, students, and families regarding our current special education efforts and work to hold all of us accountable for addressing problems.

SCHOOL START TIMES

Do you support later school start times for high schools? If so, do you support it at any cost or is there a point where you think changing the start times becomes too cost-prohibitive?

Linfeng Chen:

Yes. HCPSS should have school start times between 8 a.m. and 9:25 a.m. High school should start at 8 a.m. or slightly after 8 a.m., with middle school starting after high school and after 8 a.m. The current elementary school start times (8:15-9:25 a.m.) are reasonable. With the current budget constraint and staff shortage, I will prioritize classroom instruction and staffing, but I fully support the later school start times with a minimal impact on transportation costs. I believe HCPSS can find the solution to address later school start times without significant cost.

Jacky McCoy:

Yes, I support later school start times. The balance is what is best for students and cost to the system to make the adjustment.

TEACHERS/UNIONS

What would you do to recruit and retain quality teachers and administrators in our county? Do you have any specific initiatives or efforts in mind to hire and retain great teachers?

Linfeng Chen:

We must pay staff a decent salary and recognize a job well done through bonuses to retain our staff. We must provide more support for classroom teachers by adding paraeducators. We must also improve HR services, streamline the application process, and adjust the hiring timing to attract new graduates.

Jacky McCoy:

There is a need to elevate the value of the teaching profession in the long run, and this is one of the high-level objectives of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. In the near term, we should consider alternate paths for teacher certification. The Praxis Exam and ParaPro Exams are gatekeeping mechanisms that limit the teacher pool. Good test takers should not be the only people who make it through the process of becoming educators. Mentoring future teachers and paraeducators to gain real clinical classroom experience is valuable. Those who perform effectively during their mentorship should have the opportunity to become full-time classroom teachers. There is also a program known as "[Grow Your Own Teachers](#)" that seems to be experiencing a level of success that is worth looking into and implementing if found to be effective in developing teachers.

In the long run, productive partnerships with all universities is a must. Not limiting outreach to the schools of education but broadening the net to other schools within the colleges and universities should be considered. Every possible avenue of recruitment must be explored. Human Resources' employment processes and wages have to be competitive. Support and opportunities for advancement must be part of the package provided to potential candidates along with other incentives such as providing affordable housing vouchers to attract more teachers.

What are the three main issues affecting teacher retention and how will you address it?

Linfeng Chen:

Lack of support, workload, and salary are the three main issues. We must provide more support for classroom teachers by adding paraeducators. We must reduce the workload (i.e., by eliminating unnecessary paperwork), so they can focus on instruction. Lastly, we must pay staff a decent salary and recognize a job well done through bonuses to retain our staff.

Jacky McCoy:

Salary, workload, opportunities for advancement. The Blueprint for Maryland must be fully implemented. However, teacher salaries must be raised higher than the level proposed in the Blueprint.

STATE

What would you focus on advocating in state legislation that impacts HCPSS?

Linfeng Chen:

I will be a vocal advocate in securing state matching funds. Howard County should get a fair share of state support in Blueprint and other state education initiatives.

Jacky McCoy:

My primary focus would be in ensuring the state fully funds the Blueprint recommendations. Obtaining additional funds for school construction, renovation, and maintenance would be a close second.

What requirements set forth by the Blueprint/Kirwan are achievable in your term and which are at most risk of noncompliance?

Linfeng Chen:

The teacher salary increase is achievable. Pre-K education requires a lot of investment from the State and County. With the current budget constraint, I believe Pre-K education can be achieved, but in a delayed schedule.

Jacky McCoy:

Creating the dual path for educators to become master educators or administrators is achievable and would help significantly with staff retention. With our tight budget situation, anything that has to do with additional resources required from HCPSS (classroom space for early education, supplemental instruction, etc.) is something that is at risk and must be managed carefully.

INNOVATION

How would you encourage parent involvement in the school system?

Linfeng Chen:

I would encourage parents to join local PTAs and to volunteer in school events such as spring festivals, fall fun runs, teacher appreciation weeks, restaurant nights, field days, simulated congressional hearings, etc. I would also encourage involvement by ensuring adequate communications are provided to parents so that they are fully informed of school events and their child's progress.

Jacky McCoy:

One thing I would do to encourage involvement would be to provide more board meetings and community discussions located in places where parents have limited opportunities to attend board meetings at the headquarters on Route 108 may attend.

Are you concerned by the lack of diversity in GT and advanced level classes? If so, what will you do to improve representation?

Linfeng Chen:

HCPSS's implementation of universal Pre-K education according to the Blueprint can level the playing field at students' critical early learning stage, which will likely have an impact on future performance and provide for more diversity in GT and advanced level classes. We must continually work with the students, parents, teachers, PTAs, and social workers to provide all students equitable opportunities to reach their fullest potential and become the best they can be.

Jacky McCoy:

Yes, this is concerning. Better understanding what is contributing to inequities, and then holding ourselves accountable for addressing them, will be important. Interventions are best made in early childhood. Supporting birth to 3-year-old engagement as well as fully funding pre-K are critical components for leveling the playing field. We also need to provide families with the help needed to support their children at home.

HCPSS is a very top-down educational system – how would you give local schools more control while ensuring equity?**Linfeng Chen:**

Equity happens in classrooms and at local schools. The best way to ensure equity is to have good training and reward systems in place so that the local staff are motivated to do their best job in ensuring equity. The top-down approach needs to be enhanced by the bottom-up feedback approach. It is very important to have transparent communications, have all voices heard, and have policies in place to help underserved communities.

Jacky McCoy:

Each school has the best insight into the unique needs of their school population, and it is important to listen to them on this. At the same time, they also have a particular lens on how to identify and address these needs. HCPSS is working to ensure that school leadership leads their school with equity in mind. As a board member, I would view my job as helping ensure accountability in this equitable execution. Accountability comes from being visible and we need more visibility of this at the board level.

HCPSS has been at the front of the pack because it has been a progressive system. How do we continue that tradition?**Linfeng Chen:**

HCPSS should keep that tradition (emphasis on learning by doing, strong emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking, assessment by evaluation of child's projects, work product, group work and development of social skills), while adapting to face new challenges. It is important to also learn from other education systems. Keeping strong traditions and learning from others need not be mutually exclusive.

Jacky McCoy:

Howard County has a wealth of expertise that can be leveraged to continue the tradition of excellence in education. Working to bring about real engagement with families and community organizations through the concept of community schools is an approach raised in the Blueprint for Maryland that could bring out that expertise.

Each school has the best insight into the unique needs of their school population, and it is important to listen to them on this. At the same time, they also have a particular lens on how to identify and address those needs. HCPSS is working to ensure that school leadership leads their school with an equity lens. As a board member, my job is to provide accountability and focus to ensure equitable access and opportunities are actually taking place.

CURRICULUM

What is your position on Social/Emotional Learning (SEL) in elementary schools? Please explain your position.

Linfeng Chen:

Students need social-emotional learning. Knowing how to express yourself when you are upset without anger and without lashing out at others is very important. It is also important to be able to learn to share your happy, exciting, and sad moments. In addition, children need to learn the cues of these emotions and learn how to react when their classmates are angry, sad, happy, excited, or scared. HCPSS should have social emotional learning in grades as early as possible and build up school-family-community partnerships.

Jacky McCoy:

SEL is essential to ready students to engage in academics. Connect before content.

DIVERSITY/INCLUSION

The school system is spending a large amount of time, money, and resources in the area of restorative justice. What do you see as the benefits of this practice and the shortfalls when it comes to meeting the social/emotional needs of all students?

Linfeng Chen:

The benefits of this practice include helping to reduce recidivism and suspension rates, ultimately leading to graduation and long-term success. The intention is to identify root causes and develop specific strategies to address the causes. However, often the causes happen out of the school system and require participation from the whole community to fully address the issue.

Jacky McCoy:

Recognizing that bias is in everyone, there is the need to make real efforts to build good relationships between students and staff through SEL to reduce the incidents that would bring about the need for restorative justice interventions.

What will you do to ensure our ALS (Academic Life Skills) students have access to a well-rounded education that balances curriculum as well as the transition needs of our neediest students?

Linfeng Chen:

The ALS program should be designed for our ALS students to receive their instruction in self-contained and/or general education curriculum and extracurricular school activities with support and intervention as needed. ALS students must be exposed to all education opportunities with the least intervention necessary to keep general education classrooms running smoothly.

Jacky McCoy:

As with other aspects of special education, measurement and accountability are an important aspect of helping to ensure ALS students have access to the education they deserve. As a Board member, accountability will be a focus.

What is your plan to address the disproportional suspension of students of color and special education students?

Linfeng Chen:

It is important that all students be treated equally. If one student is suspended for fighting, then all students should be suspended for fighting. It should not be left to the discretion of the principal; however, there are always extenuating circumstances and, in those cases, if a principal is not in favor of suspension for an offense, the principal should put the case up in front of a board who will decide if suspension is warranted. In addition, a student should be able to appeal their suspension in front of a board of review. Finally, the Superintendent and the Board of Education should be reviewing all suspensions on a quarterly basis to see if there are biases or inequities that need to be addressed.

Jacky McCoy:

Provide visibility and accountability

HOT TOPICS*

Do you think the Student Member of the Board (SMOB) should vote on budget matters?

Linfeng Chen:

No. The current SMOB voting rights should not be expanded to budget matters. The SMOB is a High School Student, and they have classes to attend, homework to do, and tests to study for. therefore, they should not be focusing on the details of the highly complex HCPSS budget. In order to make sound budgetary decisions you must get into the details of the budget, attend all the budget meetings, and be available for citizens to weigh into the budget process, which is not feasible for a high school student.

Jacky McCoy:

Yes, the SMOB should be able to vote on budget matters. They are the elected representative of an important constituency, our students.

Would you endorse mandatory vaccinations for faculty and students?

Linfeng Chen:

I will encourage faculty and students to take vaccinations. I understand people may have concerns and health conditions that do not allow them to take vaccinations. We need to take measures to accommodate their situations, so I do not believe mandatory vaccinations are appropriate

Jacky McCoy:

I endorse mandatory vaccinations in keeping with our current approaches for vaccination and health service recommendations.

Do you feel restroom gender policies need adjustment? Do you believe transgender students should be able to use the bathroom they choose?

Linfeng Chen:

No, I think the restroom gender policies are sufficient. HCPSS Guidelines for Supporting Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students cover most scenarios. Every student needs to feel safe and that their privacy is protected during restroom and locker room use. Transgender students should be given options and choice, including use of the restroom for the gender with which they identify and/or a safe and adequate alternative, such as a single “unisex” restroom. Administrators can work with students, staff, and facilities to designate a restroom as gender neutral. Accommodations can be made for any student who is uncomfortable or feels their privacy is being infringed upon.

Jacky McCoy:

Schools will need to transition to individual stall restrooms over time to provide the privacy needed by students. In the meantime, providing designated restrooms for transgender students is a reasonable accommodation.

What adjustments to HCPSS programs would you make to accommodate homeschool and charter school students?

Linfeng Chen:

I support parents deciding where they choose to educate their children. I do not support public school funds paying for a private school or home school education unless there is an educational need of the student that cannot be met by the public school.

Jacky McCoy:

I am not aware of any adjustments needed at this time

What safety measures will you change from current levels? Do you support SROs in all middle and high schools?

Linfeng Chen:

I will support bringing SRO back to the middle schools and support SROs in all middle and high schools. School Resource Officers are important to maintaining a safe environment for students to learn. It makes sense to have SROs now more than ever if we consider staff shortages, increased school fighting, and increased violence. SROs serve multiple functions. The first function is related to safety. SROs can address shootings in schools, have immediate contact via their radio to call in help if needed, can provide training along with the administration to both teachers and students on what to do if there is a safety issue at school, and can be the person you want students to go to as part of see something - say something. Second, knowing there is an SRO present deters many students from taking out their frustration and aggression on others. Third, SROs can serve as career role models. In addition to teaching classes from time to time related to drugs, DUI, traffic safety, how to handle a traffic stop, and our rights and responsibilities, they can be the first point of contact for a student interested in a law enforcement career. SROs should be thoroughly vetted before entering the program and they should receive continued training throughout the year and on summer breaks.

Jacky McCoy:

No one human being can provide safety to an entire school. There must be a level of vigilance on the part of everyone in the schools. Efforts must be made to better train not only teachers and administrators, but support staff to engage with young people more effectively in order to de-escalate situations that have the potential to go down the wrong path. There is also a need to work with students to help them monitor and manage their conduct in the schools. This is where classroom efforts to incorporate social-emotional learning practices can pay dividends.

Should HCPSS have reopened for in-person learning before March 2021?

Linfeng Chen:

I think HCPSS should have implemented mitigation measures quickly to reopen for in-person learning before March 2021.

Jacky McCoy:

The issue of reopening was clearly a contentious one, but at this point, it is in our past. Should the board be faced with another such decision in the future, as a member I would focus on what is in the best interest of our students and our staff, keeping science at the center of the decision-making process.

One of the issues in today's public education is which entity should decide the books available to children of various ages in Howard County schools – who do you think should be decision makers?

Linfeng Chen:

Just like other key issues, I believe the Board of Education should supervise the way in which these decisions are made. Policy 8040-Selection of Instructional Materials establishes procedures for the evaluation, selection, and review of instructional materials for use in Howard County Public Schools. The Board of Education is in charge of setting up the vision, modifying and updating the policy. The Superintendent/Designee (including Curriculum Area Selection Committees) then oversees the selection of instructional materials that align with the vision and goals of the HCPSS Board of Education.

Jacky McCoy:

There is a process where families can give input that is established in Policy 8040. However, there are no opportunities for families lacking available time and transportation to participate in the review committee process outlined in that policy. Transparency of the process would be helpful to address concerns about the selection of instructional materials.

Providing course syllabi for students and families could also alleviate concerns. Sending out clear statements from the Superintendent, Directors, Principals, and Teachers regarding the teaching of controversial issues at the beginning of each school year could reduce some level of concern. Teachers and administrators should be open to hear the concerns of families and respectful of those concerns. Families should have the ability to have their children opt out of instruction that they don't want their children exposed to; however, there is no place for books and materials that are properly vetted and reviewed to be excluded from instruction or removed from the media center.

Library Media Specialists have professional standards by which they select age-appropriate media materials. Parents can bring their concerns to the BOE for consideration. The BOE is responsible for amending or developing policies that support the developmental and learning needs of students. The superintendent is charged with the responsibility to ensure that established policies are carried out with fidelity.

Do you believe realtors and developers should be penalized for advertising certain schools to potential home buyers?

Linfeng Chen:

Potential home buyers can do some research and determine schools regardless of whether it is communicated by realtors and developers. The real challenge is to make all schools better across the county. We cannot achieve that by penalizing realtors and developers for advertising certain schools.

Jacky McCoy:

Yes, the National Association of Realtors prohibits realtors from making reference to school districts during house sales.

* Please note that the PTA Council of Howard County is a county-wide, volunteer, and non-partisan entity. Questions provided are representative of citizen responses; and do not reflect official positions of PTACHC, unless noted. PTACHC has not taken a position on any of the hot topics listed above.