



2020 Anne Arundel County Public Schools Candidate Questionnaire

CANDIDATE: India Ochs

OFFICE SOUGHT: Board of Education Member: District 6

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I confirm that the responses provided here are my official positions in seeking local office and I understand that the Teachers Association of Anne Arundel County (TAAAC) reserves the right to share my responses with members and interested parties.

CANDIDATE SIGNATURE: India I Ochs DATE SUBMITTED: 18 Feb 2020

Candidates: In order to be considered for a recommendation, you must indicate your response to each of the questions. Clarifications, explanations, and other information may be attached, but please be certain to indicate clearly the questions(s) to which you refer. Please return your completed and signed questionnaire to the Teachers Association of Anne Arundel County.

Education Funding and Staffing

1. Please provide your general and specific thoughts on how the county can address the unmet needs facing our schools. Detail how you would prioritize aid for education in your budget deliberations.

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future will be a tremendous benefit to all our students in the state and in our county, but we cannot wait for it, nor will it address all our needs in Anne Arundel County. We need to change the whole climate/culture within AACPS when it comes to equity and not only the gaps in test scores but how certain populations are disciplined/referred more than others. We also need to **show** full transparency in all areas, starting from the Board and Central Office. I will continue to use transparency with hate incidents as an example for addressing these issues - when something like racist flyers are put on cars in South River, a letter should be sent to all AACPS families and not just families at that school. As I have stated before, if you get a letter from your school, you will think "Oh no, that happened in my backyard" but if you get a letter about another school, and keep getting them, you are more likely to realize, "oh no, this kind of racism is systemic". And yes, we cannot wait for the Blueprint to be implemented if we want to retain teachers, stay in compliance with special education regulations, address the mental health issues that can't be put on pause as we wait for Kirwan funding, and stop the steady increase in the graduation gap with our non-English speaking students. For that reason, I will advocate for increase teacher pay and step increases, as many general education and special education teachers and support staff as we need to meet our population increases, more mental health support, and more bilingual teachers and support staff. I do not believe in the current method of just asking for what we THINK we can get – we need to ask for what we know we NEED and see what happens – and if we don't get everything we need this time, we keep asking until we do. It's a crazy saying but I do believe in the concept if you shoot for the moon, you land on a star.

2. There is considerable room for improvement in addressing educator recruitment and retention. Across the state, educator salaries have been relatively flat for the last ten years. Pension benefits have been reduced but employee contributions have increased. Class sizes have increased as a result of cost-cutting measures and/or due to hiring freezes, layoffs, and retirements. Support personnel positions have been eliminated. How will you address critical concerns with educator recruitment and retention?

Increasing teacher pay and ensuring proper step increases will always be part of the agenda, as will maintaining the strong benefit package AACPS teachers currently receive. Yet the ability to recruit and retain educators goes beyond just making sure they don't need a second job.

There are several factors I want to initially address when it comes to recruitment: recruiting from a dwindling teacher applicant pool, incentives to work for AACPS/the onboarding process, and recruiting a more diverse staff. I also just want to state upfront that I know AACPS is attempting some of these action items, to varying levels of success – but in my view, there is always room for

better results, to push the boundary with new ideas or new tactics on current ideas, so that we continually do whatever we can to recruit the best of the best.

All the data shows a significant decrease in students enrolling in teaching programs (one survey showed a 35% drop between 2009-2014), which impacts recruitment nationwide. For long-term results, I support the idea of making Crofton High School a signature school for education so we can help foster future AACPS teachers from our own student population. In the short-term, and this also merges into my second point, we need to promote AACPS to be the best places to teach, in a 21st century environment. AACPS may already be analyzing data to see what recruiting methods or venues produce the most hires, but are we also surveying teachers at our schools to see why they like teaching there – which would help develop better recruitment methods in promoting why “this is a great school to work at”? We can promote AACPS all we want as a gold standard school system, but if we highlight the successes at specific schools that have openings, it enables potential applicants to be drawn to a school at a personal level.

Onboarding is also a critical piece in both recruiting and retaining staff. I would want to review the onboarding process to see what works and what might be turning new teachers off. Do new teachers have the proper supports they need such as mentors – and how long do those mentors maintain relationships with the new teachers? Are there elements of the onboarding process that new teachers feel are too burdensome or unnecessary? Were there things missing in the orientation that new teachers wished they had known about at the start? Those are the kinds of questions I would ask staff to look into and analyze for any trends, and help staff strengthen the program if there were any areas of weakness.

Another element in improving retention is ensuring teachers and staff are treated like professionals from the top down. No one would disagree that everyone in AACPS (and the community) will say how much we love our teachers and support them, but I want to make sure that public talk is not just lip service and ensure staff are actually *treated* with respect/as professionals by the Board, administration, peers, and the community.

One of my main priorities entering this election, which is connected to both equity and teacher support, is the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. I know AACPS does things like attend job fairs or other outreach at HBCUs, but are we promoting AACPS enough to distinguish it from the other school systems also recruiting? More importantly, I want to ensure that when AACPS does hire teachers of color, it is placing those teachers in all subject fields/grade levels and properly promoting them in leadership positions. I would need to collect the data to analyze trends within AACPS, but data does show that nationwide, teachers of color are often segregated into certain positions like special education or not offered leadership positions like department heads – largely because of complaints from white parents – and I do not want that to ever occur in AACPS schools. Just as we do with other teachers, if we put teachers of color into the subjects/grades they thrive in and allow them to tap into their skills as teachers and leaders, we have a much better chance of retaining them for the long-term.

Finally, let me go back to pay for a moment...it's easy to advocate for increased teacher pay, but we must also advocate for appropriate and livable pay for all staff – teacher assistants, support staff etc. If a school is to be successful, it needs to function as a team, which means teachers need the support from the rest of the staff. If the support staff has high turn over, it creates more barriers for the teachers to have that stability in their support system working with kids. Bottom line, if AACPS wants to recruit and retain support staff (in general ed and special ed), AACPS needs to raise support staff salaries – and definitely should not be paying any employee a salary that qualifies them for food stamps.

3. Do you support or oppose proposed changes to Maryland's maintenance of effort law that requires local jurisdictions to fund the greater of the same per pupil allocation in local aid for education as the prior year or the local share of weights related to risk factors in the funding formula?

☒ Support

☐ Oppose

Additional Comments: If proposed changes strengthen local funding under the MOE requirements - and does not weaken the MOE - then I would be in support of any amendments. I also am interested to see the impact of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and if local funding that is above the MOE requirements will actually be considered part of the increased local funding required by The Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

4. As a Board member, are you in favor of contracting out custodial, cafeteria, and maintenance services rather than have those services provided by Board of Education employees?

☐ Support

☒ Oppose

Additional Comments: As someone who is a certified Contracting Officer Representative as part of my day job and have both colleagues and support staff who are contractors, I actually am tentatively in opposition to contracting out any AACPS staff, including custodial, cafeteria, and maintenance services. I would need to review the situation at AACPS but just from my own experience at my work, while my own specific office treats/respects our contractors just like our full-time employees, I see how they feel marginalized in other parts of my agency, along with knowing the activities contractors cannot partake in (holiday parties, most professional development training) due to regulations. This marginalization is especially apparent with the custodial and cafeteria staff my agency contracts with through Melwood – it's great that people with disabilities are able to work here but again, I feel they are limited in their growth and support as custodial and cafeteria staff, which is why I would favor full-time employees for all positions, whenever possible.

5. As a Board member, are you in favor of allocating public funding to home and privately schooled students?

☐ Support

☒ Oppose

Additional Comments: With the exception of funding students with disabilities who must attend home or private school as a last resort in order to get the proper education they need and deserve, I am opposed to any public funding going to home or privately schooled students. Public schools are here for all our kids and must have complete support in ensuring the best education for those kids – and any decrease in public funding will just harm our school system. I will also note that I am especially in opposition to any public funding going to a privately schooled student who is attending a school that discriminates (e.g., against LGBTQ students, certain religions, students with disabilities, etc.).

Evaluations and Less Testing, More Learning

6. Do you support or oppose local autonomy to develop evaluation systems in compliance with statute and regulation?

☒ Support

☐ Oppose

Additional Comments: I am always in support of local counties having the ability to develop their own evaluation systems, that are in compliance, so that it properly conforms to the needs/operations of the local jurisdiction. As will be cited below, I do not believe in an one-size-fits-all model: every county had different demographics, different education and employment levels, different community needs, and school systems should be able to shape their evaluations (and virtually all operations) based on their specific student population.

7. Do you support or oppose efforts to overturn the school district's mutually agreed upon, statutorily compliant evaluation models in pursuit of one-size-fits-all models developed by federal and state agencies, rather than local education agencies?

☐ Support

☒ Oppose

Additional Comments: As cited above, I am against any one-size-fits-all model developed at the state or federal level. Yes, there are certain *laws or regulations* that need to be implemented at the state or federal level to ensure all students are protected within the school system (e.g., IDEA, federal laws on homeless students), but when it comes to things like evaluations, state or federal implemented evaluations would miss addressing the needs unique to students in our county.

8. Do you support or oppose efforts to provide educators with sufficient professional development to ensure that they can deliver high-quality instruction aligned with College and Career Readiness.

☒ Support

☐ Oppose

Additional Comments: This seems like a no-brainer to me and quite frankly, anyone that opposes professional development for educators should not be involved with the school system. Professional development is part of almost every workforce, whether required or not, and is especially critical for educators. Its not just curriculum and teaching methods that change over the years, but society as a whole that is continually evolving, and educators need to keep up on such changes if they will provide the best education to our kids. As a student and parent of AACPS, I know that not only has the

curriculum and learning styles changed from when I attended 25-30 years ago, but technology has expanded things like assistive technology or other supports for people with speech disabilities, the types of disabilities have expanded, the dialogue in society related to race, transgender, Muslims, etc. has changed, mental health and suicide have slowly become more acceptable to talk about, the rate of school shootings have increased by numbers I don't even want to think about – but my point in throwing out all these random things is that its totally different now and professional development is needed to ensure the 1st year teacher I had in 6th grade, who is still with AACPS, is not teaching with the same methods or mindset as 32 years ago.

Collective Bargaining

9. Do you support or oppose public education employees' rights to bargain collectively?

☒ Support

☐ Oppose

Additional Comments: I am in full support of the right to bargain collectively, so that educators have a strong voice in their pay, benefits, work conditions, leave options, and other protections to ensure the best teaching environment.

10. How familiar are you with the TAAAC contract?

☒ Familiar

☐ Unfamiliar

Additional Comments: I would have preferred a "Somewhat Familiar" option. ☺ I actually appreciate that the public is able to access AACPS's contract with TAAAC (and other employee affiliated groups) and I have been able to keep track of the final negotiated agreements over the last several years, but I wish I was more familiar with the actual negotiations so that I knew what was left out of the agreements and what was compromised on.

What changes, if any would you like to see? And how would you honor the negotiated agreement, especially in tight fiscal times?

First, I will always honor the negotiated agreement under any circumstance – as an attorney and human rights advocate that supports the United Nations' 1949 Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention and International Labor Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, I always believe in adhering to whatever is in the agreement with TAAAC unless TAAAC and/or the Board follows the due process outlined in the contract for any amendments.

In terms of any changes, the majority of the 2019-2020 contract appears to be adequate. I appreciate the sections on leave, workdays/responsibilities, political activity, and due process, and of course I would like to see back or catchup step increases continue to be included until all educators are caught up to their relevant, deserving, salaries.

A few items in the 2019-2020 agreement did raise questions:

- The section under “Joint Committee on Safe and Orderly Learning Environment” seems to be outdated: it states “The joint committee will meet during the first half of school year **2009-10** and shall have report with recommendations prepared for submission to the negotiating teams by the start of the second semester.” There is no wording suggesting the joint committee would keep meeting after the 2009-2010 school year.
- Under Article 10(C) Use of Force, I would like to know what is the threshold for “reasonable force” and if the term “use reasonable force” related to the restraint of a student corresponds to the intent of the use of restraint under Board Regulation JK-RA. If it is not in compliance with Board regulation, I would want to change the wording to ensure educators are very clear on what level of physical force they can use when restraining a student.
- Under Article 10(F) Student Information, it states: “Unit I members shall be informed on a need-to-know basis concerning pupils with disabilities or a history of serious overt behavior that would endanger the safety of themselves and others in the classroom.” From an outsider view, my thought was why pupils with disabilities would be separate from pupils with a history of serious overt behavior when would endanger the safety of themselves and others in the classroom. If the point is to inform staff if a student has a history of serious overt behavior that could be a danger to themselves or others – why does it make a difference if the student has a disability or not. I am happy to hear clarification on this wording but my suggestion is to remove reference to disabilities and just to say “Unit I members shall be informed on a need-to-know basis concerning pupils with a history of serious overt behavior that would endanger the safety of themselves and others in the classroom.”

Parental Involvement

11. As a Board member, what would you do to increase parental involvement and public support for our public schools and educators?

I have several action items I would like to try to implement to increase parental involvement and public support for our schools and education.

- First, I would like to hold quarterly meetings in the community where Board members meet with students to hear their thoughts/feedback about school and their education. The meetings would ideally be held at the community centers near public housing or other low-income areas. If possible, I would like to hold the same kind of community meetings for parents and the public – maybe having joint meetings at the same time, in separate rooms, if we have enough Board involvement. I think it is so critical to hear from our students and it has to be done in a setting they can be at.
- As a two-term President of one of the more active (and financially stable) PTAs, I have seen first hand the inequities that result when schools do not have PTAs like the one at Hillsmere

Elementary. And while its great that Hillsmere allows Georgetown East to borrow our games for their fun festival or to take any leftover gifts from our holiday bazaar, that is **no where enough** in terms of supporting our sister schools. I would like to put into practice what has been talked about before and have the more active PTAs be a mentor for other schools who have no PTA or just a small group of parents. I also want to encourage cross-meeting activities so that other PTAs in a cluster can participate in different school activities – two examples, 1) it would have been great if Hillsmere families got to visit Eastport Elementary’ s international night last month with information on different countries and the kids artwork; and 2) when I was PTA President in 2016-2017, I brought in a speaker on transgender issues to talk at a PTA meeting because I believe discussions on transgender issues need to start at the elementary school level. I emailed the County PTA association to send a notice to other PTAs to come attend, but no email went out to all the other PTAs. This was before I found out about the multitude of Facebook community pages but I really think things like a presentation on transgender issues should be shared with as many families in AACPS as possible – and so I want a way where those kinds of speakers or events can be broadcasted widely and create a culture where schools feel comfortable visiting each other and building those relationships.

- This seems minor but for over a year now, I have tried every tactic to get the **complete** description of how to give public comment on the AACPS website. I tried to get Board members to ask AACPS to update the information, I emailed the Board directly with my suggested edits, and then I publicly testified about it at a Board of Education meeting, and yet AACPS still will not update its information on public comment, leading to continual confusion that the public can only sign up to sign online, by 5:00pm on that day before the meeting (versus signing up in person before the meeting starts). Again, this seems minor but that kind of confusion on public comment is a major deterrent to some who feel they have no voice – and I swear I will get it updated on the AACPS no matter how many times I have to talk about it. As someone who has been to more Board meetings then I can count over the last five years, I also know that the Board listens to the public, but too many people think the Board doesn’t care what they have to say. I want to show them that every voice does matter, so that more parents and the public do show up at Board meetings and share their thoughts or concerns.

Community Schools

12. Do you support or oppose local efforts to create and support community schools in our county?

☒ Support

☐ Oppose

Additional Comments: I wholeheartedly support efforts to create and support community schools in our county. As someone who worked with human rights activists on the ground for the right to education in Guatemala and saw how parents were limited in their support for education because they had to first focus on food and shelter, or saw all the resources lacking child laborers in India or farmworkers who ended up in actual slavery in the United States, I know just how critical it is to have

access to food/nutrition services, health services, mental health etc., if we want to then allow our kids – and their families - to focus on education. To many, school is their one safe place and if they can have full support for other parts of their life at the same place, all the better in reducing the achievement and opportunities gap!

13. Do you support or oppose local efforts to create community schools beyond the schools in concentrated poverty that are directly supported with state funding?

☒ Support

☐ Oppose

Additional Comments: My additional comments are all in the answer immediately above – I think if we see a need for community schools, we should do whatever we can to get them established.

Essay Questions

What are the top three things you would like to accomplish in the next four years if you are elected to the Board?

There are so many things I feel are high priority for strengthening AACPS but the number one issue that I feel all others impact is equity for all. Nothing can be accomplished overnight, but if I can establish effective methods and accountability measures to address the inequities AACPS is facing, that would be one of the best legacies to leave. Specifically, as outlined on my website since day one, and referenced some above, I hope to 1) Engage with the community to create a sense of system- and community-urgency to aggressively do “whatever it takes” for every student to achieve success in school, 2) Address disciplinary practices in schools that disproportionately affect our students of color and/or with disabilities, 3) Continue to strengthen our curriculum and school activities throughout the year to reflect our diverse student population, 4) Find new ways to recruit, hire, and retain teachers and school administrators of color. Ensure these teachers are appropriately placed in all subjects/grades and provided leadership opportunities; 5) Monitor system performance of all students to assess, report, and communicate the academic performance of all students This includes securing publicly accessible monthly statics of the demographics behind student discipline referrals, citations, and arrests, 6) Increase access to English as a Second Language instruction, and 7) Ensure AACPS policies on bullying and biased behavior are properly enforced.

My second high priority would be reduction in class size. I want to push for more classroom teachers so we can get class sizes to match state standards at all grade levels. As expressed earlier, teacher pay will always be at the forefront of any budget, but focus needs to remain on class sizes as well as our student population increases each year. Reducing class size will result in students getting more individual attention and help retain teachers who otherwise might feel too overwhelmed in the classroom. Will we get all classes in all AACPS schools at the levels we want within four years? I can’t guarantee that, just as we can’t guarantee when the Blueprint will be fully implemented, but if we put in measures to budget for more teachers each year, it can be done.

My third “top priority” involves changing the whole way AACPS approaches special education. Our special education teachers are nothing if not stellar, but we need to change the culture he way the

administration views and treats our students with disabilities. Year after year, the budget proposal cites how AACPS's Special Education programs have been on the edge of federal noncompliance, yet nothing is done to fully address the problems. There are not enough special education teachers or support staff to care for the needs of all our students. With the lack of adequate staffing, students do not get properly assessed for months, sometimes years - and assessment is key to qualify for needed supports. Students who do require extra supports have them removed due to lack of funding. Teachers do not always attend IEP meetings. And some of our most vulnerable students with limited communication are put in danger because no one takes time to listen to them. All of this must stop. As outlined on my website, I want to 1) Develop methods so we routinely listen to the students, 2) Ensure all students, regardless of race, socio-economic background, age, or type of disability, are properly assessed and provided the support they are entitled to under law, 3) Secure more funding for special education teachers and support staff, 4) Ensure families have access to a fair and equitable due process, no matter how many times they need to file a complaint, 5) Re-examine the two track (diploma versus certificate) system to ensure all students are properly placed - and have resources to change at any time during their educational careers, and 6) Educate all teachers, staff, and students by debunking the myths about students with disabilities. And specifically in regards to the last item, I want to make sure students with disabilities are academically challenged and provided the same opportunities to learn about world history, civics, foreign languages, etc that their non-disabled peers have. I also want to bring a shift in culture in the same way I established and ran a nonprofit in Baltimore that united youth with and without sensory disabilities through service learning and athletic activities, in that instead of group A (kids that can see) going to help group B (kids blind or visually impaired), Groups A and B worked together to help Group C (kids with and without visual impairments running a bingo night at a public housing community center in the inner city).

What experience do you have that you feel qualifies you to serve on the Board of Education?

Simply put, my whole life has prepared me to be on the Anne Arundel County Board of Education. On the one hand, I know I would bring all the tangibles in successfully serving on the Board: with 20 years of public service in law and policy, establishing a nonprofit and its Board of Directors from scratch, serving as President of five Boards of Directors at the local, national, and international level, not to mention being that freak carrying two editions of Roberts Rules of Order in my backpack in 9th grade, I will understand the Board's legal, budget, and procedural operations from day one. (Plus I have been the only citizen attending the Board's Policy Committee meetings years before I even thought about running for office.) I also come with a diverse background in education: I conducted my first workshop at age 11, gave my first lecture to all grades at an elementary school in Baltimore when I was 12, and have facilitated/conducted workshops, lectures, webinars, youth leadership conferences, and presentations before audiences from 2-800 people, of all ages, around the world (My son has started the same path even earlier, coauthoring a workshop in Canada at age 6 and co-paneling a webinar on leadership with me when he was 8). I also have direct classroom experience teaching a high school law class in rural upstate New York in 2001-2002 and helped review the AACPS social studies curriculum in 1993. Additionally, I will bring a national and international perspective on education and youth issues with my past work as Legal Officer at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights coordinating legal and

legislative projects with human right activists in 21 countries, including the right to education in Guatemala, eliminating child labor in India, and combating modern-day slavery in the United States, Senior Project Associate at the Pretrial Justice Institute working on juvenile detention reform issues, and currently as a Compliance Officer with the United States Department of State, where part of my work is monitoring the activities/work/contracts of foreign exchange high school & college students and foreign exchange teachers.

At the same time, I will bring a combination of intangibles that no other Board member has. I am not just a life-long resident of Annapolis, but have been advocating for Anne Arundel County Public Schools virtually my whole life. I bring the unique perspective as a student of Head Start, Central Special, Hillsmere Elementary, the former Annapolis Junior High, and Annapolis Senior High School. I know the brilliance of AACPS' gifted & talented programs at AACC and the Naval Academy when I was a kid, just as I understand the discrimination I faced from staff in 4th grade. And I bring experience as a student advocate when I was active in CRASC from 8-12 grades, including being chief legislative coordinator during the passage of the service learning graduation requirement, securing partial voting rights for the Maryland State Student on the Board, and banning smoking at all county school campuses. Jump a few decades and I also will bring the experience of a parent of a son attending the same elementary school, serving two terms as Hillsmere PTA president and regularly advocating on behalf of Hillsmere, the Annapolis cluster and all of the county, as a parent, since 2016. I am one of those people who stays until 1:00am at a Board meeting and who has written Letters to the editor on behalf of AACPS and our students since 1991. I also have an established track record of building trust among people of any age or backgrounds and being that anchor with a diverse group of options. Finally, the simple truth is people listen to me, partly because of my disability but more so because I listen to them. I don't like to talk about this part but the reality is, I motivate people wherever I go, and if on the Board, I know I have the potential to motivate hundreds if not thousands more, and push people towards their own definition of success. Given everything above, I believe I bring the whole package to be a productive and successful member of the Board of Education – in a way rarely seen by most.