

2024 WCTA & WCESP
Washington County Board of Education
Candidate Questionnaire

CANDIDATE: _____Melissa Williams_____

OFFICE SOUGHT: _____Washington County Board of Education_____

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I confirm that the responses provided here are my official positions in seeking local office and I understand that WCTA & WCESP reserves the right to share my responses with members and interested parties.

CANDIDATE SIGNATURE: Melissa A. Williams **DATE SUBMITTED:** 2/26/24

*Candidates: 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 clearly indicate the question(s) to which you refer. **Please return your completed and signed questionnaire to WCTA & WCESP.***

Education Funding

Background Points

- With a critical need in closing education gaps, expanding programs and services, community schools, and improving student achievement, in 2016, lawmakers formed the Kirwan Commission to meet the challenges of a changing global economy and prepare Maryland students to be successful citizens in the 21st century.
- The Kirwan Commission's recommendations evolved into The Blueprint for Maryland's Future, which originally passed in 2020, was vetoed by Governor Hogan, and had its veto overridden in 2021. The Blueprint revises the state's school funding formula for the first time in nearly two decades. Over the next 13 years, the Blueprint calls for billions of dollars of new investment in Maryland schools that would expand career and technical education programs, community schools, and pre-k; provide more resources for students from backgrounds of poverty and students with special needs; increase educator pay; hire more educators and expand and diversify the educator pipeline; and create a new, more rigorous accountability system. These programs are designed to raise achievement and address Maryland's economic inequality with programs to target concentrated poverty.
- The Board of Education will have a significant impact on implementation of the Blueprint, including future funding and success of Washington County schools. The Blueprint is landmark legislation, but there is a continued need for investment in Washington County schools to see that the Blueprint is successfully implemented, and in ensuring that educator voices are heard and respected throughout implementation.

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 available state and county resources in your budget deliberations.

The county can address the unmet needs facing our schools by recognizing that the BOE budget request is truly needs-based and acknowledging that by, at a minimum, fully funding the budget. The BOE must continue to meet jointly with the commissioners as well as one-on-one with individual commissioners. These meetings can be used to enlighten the commissioners as we try to move them toward that funding goal.

I fully support the budget priorities set by the BOE for FY2025:

- **Salary and Compensation to Attract and Retain Staff**
- **Safety & Security, Mental Health, and Behavioral Supports**
- **Meeting the Requirements of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future**
- **Combating Inflation**

2. There is considerable room for improvement in addressing educator recruitment and retention. Class sizes have increased because of cost-cutting measures and/or due to hiring freezes, layoffs, and retirements. Many support personnel positions have been eliminated. And Maryland is always challenged with filling educator jobs because we import nearly half of all certificated teachers from prep programs in other states. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these shortages. At the same time, the Blueprint calls for the hiring of 15,000 additional educators to provide more individualized attention to students. How will you address critical concerns with educator recruitment and retention?

I support improving salaries and compensation to recruit and retain staff.

I support grow-your-own initiatives at the county and state level.

I support investigating alternative pathways to professional certification.

Attracting, supporting, and retaining teachers of the highest quality is extremely important to the success of our school system. Showing our current employees respect, treating them as professionals, and compensating them for that professionalism is an important part of recruiting and retaining employees of high quality. To increase our employee candidate pool, we must reach out to potential candidates through community networks, continue to expand the current HR recruitment efforts, and ensure that all WCPS workplaces have a positive culture and are welcoming to diversity.

Public Funding for Private Schools

Background Points

- The WCTA & WCESP associations believe any education dollars spent outside of improving public schools makes it harder to make the progress necessary to provide a world-class education for every student.
- Non-public school funding for programs in the budget such as textbooks, technology, school construction, and vouchers reduce the state's General Fund while subsidizing the cost of private education. Data from the first few years of the BOOST program indicated that more than 70% of voucher recipients already attended and paid for private school before receiving the voucher.
- The Maryland State Department of Education requires a certificate of approval or registration for private schools; it does not accredit or license them. Private schools do not have to report or administer teacher qualifications, class sizes, adherence to College and Career Readiness Standards, student retention rates, graduation rates, demographics, or discipline or suspension policies. Without these measures, it is impossible to effectively evaluate the programs funneling public tax dollars to private schools.

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

Support

Oppose

Additional Comments:

I'm not now, nor have I ever been in favor of public funds being used to support home and privately schooled students. Our public schools exist to provide a high quality, free education to *all* children. Under law, parents have the option to homeschool or to send their children to a private school of their choice. The costs incurred in doing so should be the total responsibility of the parents, not the taxpayers.

Evaluations and Less Testing, More Learning

Background Points

- The WCTA & WCESP associations believe that educator evaluation systems must be educator-informed, research-based, and collaboratively developed. Evaluation systems should be fair, transparent, timely, rigorous, valid, and designed to improve instruction by focusing on teaching and learning.
- Maryland law mandates that student growth is a "significant component" and "one of the multiple measures" in a teacher's evaluation. No evaluation criterion can account for more than 35%. The law also mandates that evaluation systems must be mutually agreed upon at the local level.
- A key provision of evaluation systems is the requirement for local agreement between school boards, superintendents, and local associations. Such local development allows for the evaluation system to meet the unique needs of each district.
- The WCTA & WCESP associations believe the continued push for high-stakes student assessments undermines educator's creativity and their ability to respond to the needs of students. Instead of high-stakes assessments, WCTA & WCESP supports high-quality assessments that support student learning from a rich curriculum and with room for educator's voices in the development of curriculum and assessment.
- Additionally, the WCTA & WCESP associations support rigorous and relevant professional development through the continued alignment of evaluation systems.

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

Support

Oppose

Additional Comments:

It is my belief that any educator evaluation system used must be research-based, valid, fair, and transparent. Further, I believe that it is best when an evaluation system is collaboratively developed, and it goes without saying, aligned with curricula, and focused on instruction and learning.

As a retired WCPS teacher and administrator for thirty-five years, I place high value on rigorous and relevant professional development. Over the course of my career, I benefitted from excellent professional development offerings. As one who had as her responsibility the planning and delivery of professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals as well as the observation and evaluation of both, I understand the

importance of having an evaluation system carefully designed and implemented, and I recognize and support the need to have collaboration in the design and development of it.

5. Do you support or oppose efforts to overturn school districts 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:

I do not support these efforts. I am not in favor of one-size-fits-all models.

6. As an elected Board of Education member, how will you work with WCPS, WCTA & WCESP to implement the Less Testing, More Learning Act?

Support

Oppose

Additional Comments:

I believe WCPS should collaborate with WCTA & WCESP whenever state or federal law allows for changes to standardized testing. As a BOE member I will advocate for collaboration.

Collective Bargaining

Background Points

- The WCTA & WCESP associations support efforts to protect and enhance the state's collective bargaining laws.
- Collective bargaining is the negotiation of a contract – including wages, salary scale, benefits, and working conditions – between employers and employees. The items agreed to in a ratified collective bargaining agreement apply to all employees in a bargaining unit, providing a benefit to employees and employers in not having to negotiate thousands of individual contracts.

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

Support

Oppose

Additional Comments:

I was an active member of WCTA/MSEA during my 35-year teaching career at WCPS and during that time served at least once as a member of the association's negotiating team. I have and will continue to support the right of public education employees to bargain collectively.

8. How familiar are you with the WCTA & WCESP contracts?

Familiar

Unfamiliar

Additional Comments:

As a retired WCPS teacher and administrator and a member of the Washington County Board of Education for the past 11 1/2 years, I'm very familiar with past and current WCTA and WCESP contracts and the negotiation process used.

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

The Board of Education's negotiations with the employee groups of WCPS are to be done in good faith. During my tenure, that's the way I have operated – always with respect and in good faith.

If ever times become so tight financially that the prospect of not being able to honor the negotiated agreement of the WCTA and the negotiated agreement of WCESP arises, my position would be that this requires sitting down together and working collaboratively to prioritize and find viable solutions.

Continuing Impact of the Pandemic

Background Points

- The pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing, multifaceted housing crisis. Housing costs continue to rise, keeping some families out of the market entirely, while those whose incomes were slashed during the pandemic have fallen so far behind that the Census Bureau estimates 7 million households as of late June 2021 face eviction when the temporary moratorium on eviction enacted during the pandemic is lifted.
- The pandemic has also increased stresses, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), food insecurity, and digital divide issues for our students.

10. How will you address increased needs for mental health support for students and educators in the wake of the pandemic?

These issues are not for the Board of Education alone to address. What is needed is the commitment and collaborative efforts of state and local government officials and community leaders, partnerships, the creation of joint initiatives, and the allocation of additional resources. Appropriately addressing these issues will require the involvement of the entire Washington County community.

For the Board of Education and WCPS this means keeping these increasing needs a priority, providing behavioral support personnel, appropriate numbers of school counselors and social workers, access to school psychologists, appropriate professional development for staff, and demonstrating consistent, strong issue advocacy.

Addressing the need for mental health support in our schools is one of the BOE FY2025 budget funding priorities.

11. The pandemic further illuminated the immediate need for reliable, affordable access to technology for all students and educators in our state. How would you propose to eliminate the digital divide?

I support state and federal efforts to improve broadband access and supply devices to students in need.

I support the WCPS technology plan that supplies devices to students.

Racial and Social Justice

Background Points

- The WCTA & WCESP associations unequivocally believe that our diversity makes us stronger. We fundamentally believe that schools should be safe, welcoming, and nurturing learning environments for students of all backgrounds and beliefs, and places where all our students see themselves in the lessons they learn and experiences they enjoy. While students of color made up approximately 64% of the student population across the state in school year 2019-2020, our state had only 29% teachers of color, 38% principals of color, and 45% assistant principals of color. MSEA was represented on the Kirwan Commission and a vocal advocate of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future in part because of our support for training and developing high-quality teachers and education leaders, particularly those from diverse and historically underrepresented backgrounds.
- Every child, regardless of their background or zip code, deserves education justice and equitable access to opportunities, resources, and supports. We believe that the lives of our Black and Brown students matter and that all our students have a fundamental right to be educated in safe, healthy, and supportive learning communities and all our educators deserve safe, healthy, and supportive working environments.
- The history of Maryland and U.S. history is far more diverse than is generally reflected in the content and courses currently taught in our public schools. Far too many Marylanders can progress through their formal primary and secondary education and rarely, if ever, see themselves reflected in the content they are learning or hear about themselves in the stories they read and are told. This lack of inclusivity negatively impacts not only our students' ownership of and agency in their learning, but it also adversely impacts their overall engagement in their learning and portrays a one-sided view of our history for all students. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the dearth of a more diverse field of educators in our schools and by the disproportionate (and sometime inaccurate) representations seen in society and in our culture that ultimately reinforces a sense of "otherness" for the people, communities, and cultures who have been rendered less relevant and less valuable. The WCTA & WCESP associations recognize the vital importance of ensuring that all students learn about historical figures who not only had a tremendous impact on the forming of our state and our nation but whose actions and sacrifices laid the foundation upon which this nation's pledge of "liberty and justice for all" must be built.
- The WCTA & WCESP associations are committed to developing critical thinking skills in our students because we know that they enable them to better understand the problems our society faces and to develop collective solutions. To that end, we are abundantly clear that truth and honesty are fundamental components of teaching and learning, as are academic integrity and professional responsibility. Our essential mission is to prepare our students for college, career, and life and to play an active role in our democracy.

12. The WCTA & WCESP associations support honesty in education. To encourage critical thinking, we believe educators should have professional autonomy and should be afforded the deference to teach the truth in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Do you support or oppose this position?

Support

Oppose

Additional Comments:

13. How will you support diversity, equity, and inclusion for all students throughout the county? What specific policies do you support whose goals are focused on providing equitable access, opportunities, resources, and supports?

As a member of the Maryland Association of Boards of Education I helped develop the model equity policy used by many Maryland LEAs to write their state-required local policy. I was part of the team that wrote the WCBOE equity policy. I have served as the BOE liaison to the county's Diversity and Inclusion Committee since its inception.

I support the WCPS Office of Equity & Excellence and its full-time supervisor position. I support WCPS's diversity hiring initiatives and the community scholarship for minority students entering the education field.

Community Schools

Background Points

- Poverty dramatically and negatively affects the wellbeing of children, particularly in the areas of physical health, mental health, safe housing, access to technology, parental support, family planning services, nutrition, youth employment, and education. Each of these areas play a large role in whether students can learn and do well in school—making it imperative that these opportunity gaps be closed if we want to provide an equitable education in our communities. According to data collected by MSDE, in 2022, 48% of Maryland public school students were enrolled for free and reduced-price meals this school year (meaning their family income level is at or below 185% of federal income poverty guidelines).
- The WCTA & WCESP associations support the establishment of community schools. We recognize that community schools can be transformative if done right—that is if they involve the community in a meaningful and ongoing way and are more than wrap-around services at a school.
- Community schools generally have the following four components: (1) they serve a high concentration of students in poverty; (2) they employ a full-time coordinator to lead community school-related services; (3) they conduct a needs assessment to identify key obstacles to learning and the services needed to close the opportunity gaps; and (4) they work with community partners to bring those needed services into the school building or nearby locations to make them accessible to students and community members.
- The Blueprint phases in community schools beginning in FY20, starting with 219 schools with 80% or more of their students enrolled for free and reduced-price meals. Community schools will be added, phased in according to highest levels of poverty first, until FY27, when a predicted 557—nearly one-third of all schools in the state—are projected to become community schools. That makes this one of the largest scale expansions of community schools in the nation.
- The WCTA & WCESP associations support equitable and adequate resources to provide every student with an opportunity to learn in a safe and non-disruptive environment. Establishing and funding community schools is a research-based strategy for closing opportunity gaps and building strong communities.

Parental Involvement and Public Support

Background Points

- It is calculated that school age children spend 70% of their waking hours (including weekends and holidays) outside of school.
- Research shows that the most consistent predictors of children's academic achievement and social adjustment are parental involvement in schools and parental expectations of the child's academic attainment and satisfaction with their child's education at school.
- Additionally, research indicates there are three major factors that influence parental involvement in schools:
 - Parents' belief that they can impact what is important, necessary on behalf of their children school.
 - The extent to which parents believe that they can have a positive influence on their children's education; and
 - Parents' perceptions that their children and school want them to be involved.

14. As a Board member, what would you do to ensure that parents and families from all faiths and no matter where they're from are welcomed and supported in our schools?

Parental involvement is key to a child's success in school. Parents are the child's first teacher. I encourage and support parental involvement.

I support the WCPS International Welcome Center at Pangborn. There is a real need for additional EL teachers and support staff, and I support the addition of those positions as a BOE budget priority,

Privatization

Background Points

- The WCTA & WCESP associations oppose any effort to outsource or privatize education jobs that are part of a bargaining unit. We maintain that any attempt to outsource or privatize jobs of public educators violates collective bargaining agreements because such an effort is in essence terminating or firing bargaining unit positions.
- Outsourcing and privatization efforts have threatened teacher and education support professional (ESP) jobs for years. In the last few years, Anne Arundel County has attempted to outsource teaching services for deaf and blind students, Talbot County has discussed privatizing transportation services, and Kent County has attempted to privatize custodial services. There have been multi-county efforts on the Eastern Shore to outsource the hiring of occupational therapists and physical therapists to work in the schools.
- When jobs are outsourced, quality control is diminished, and safety is compromised. Public employees are subject to background checks that private employers often do not require. After privatizing, local school boards lose control over the individuals working in schools and have little ability to provide input on job performance.
- Privatizers often use an argument of cost-savings as a means of winning contracts. The amount is often misleading because they intentionally underestimate first year operating costs. Ultimately, they reduce hours, health care coverage, or just cut jobs. All these steps lead to increase in local unemployment and less money in the community overall.

15. 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:

I oppose privatizing or outsourcing positions currently held by BOE employees.

Essay Question

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

I'm committed to:

- (1) providing each WCPS PreK-12 student with the appropriate educational rigor, opportunities, resources, and support needed for their academic success and social and emotional well-being;**
- (2) providing safe and secure learning environments for students and staff;**
- (3) hiring and retaining the best teachers, administrators, and support staff and paying them a competitive wage.**

Additionally, through the implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, I'm committed to improving public education for all students in Washington County Public Schools. This can best be accomplished by working with other BOE members and stakeholders, especially employee groups, to develop a greater understanding of the Blueprint, working closely with the superintendent and stakeholders to prioritize and make funding decisions, and working with our legislators to fine-tune the Blueprint.