

Caribbean-American Political Action Committee Candidate Questionnaire

Office Sought: Montgomery County Board of Education, At-Large

Candidate's Name: Sebastian Johnson

Current Occupation: Policy Analyst, Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy

Party: Non-Partisan

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Questions

Where do you stand specifically on the DREAM Act and DACA, especially as they apply to immigrant students graduating with advanced professional degrees?

A few months ago, I attended an emergency meeting of community members concerned about recent immigration raids. The room was packed. Nearly everyone shared a sense of shock. Raiding families who have come here to escape violence and give their kids a better life is counter to every value this country should stand for, and it's certainly counter to the best values of our county. We need leaders in Montgomery County who stand for inclusion, and not fear and intimidation.

I fully support the DREAM Act and DACA. If elected, I would support better social programs for undocumented minors who come to our schools. We need to ensure that these students feel welcomed to our schools and community so that they do not fall victim to human trafficking or gang violence. We also need to develop better opportunities for older students who come to MCPS during high school by partnering with organizations that can help them find jobs and develop employment skills. Finally, I would strengthen our current partnership with Montgomery College to provide more opportunities for first-generation immigrant students to earn college degrees.

Are you in favor of or against increased funding for language instruction as an integral part of early childhood education to help close the "achievement gap" for poor and/immigrant children? Why?

Studies show that Latino youth in our county feel profoundly disconnected from their classrooms, and language barriers contribute to that. I want to ensure that bilingual education opportunities reach students from all backgrounds and prioritize the hiring of additional bilingual faculty, so that students and teachers can learn across cultural lines.

As a former elementary school teacher in an immigrant community, I know how crucial students' first school years are for their futures. Smart investments in early childhood and elementary education are key to closing the achievement gap and meeting the challenges our county faces.

If elected, it will be my goal to help all of our county's early learners succeed in preschool, in elementary school and beyond. Investing in the success of our young learners isn't just essential for the future of our workforce; it's the right thing to do.

What concrete steps will you take to improve the School system in Montgomery County—including facilities and equipment, relationships with parents, and education standards and test scores?

Growing up, I was lucky to grow up surrounded by caring adults and opportunities outside the classroom. Those relationships helped me become a productive member of society, and they helped me develop essential skills for the future. Those relationships and opportunities can be lifelines for students grappling with poverty, troubled home life and other barriers to learning, which too many of our young people face.

That's why I will fight to increase the number of community schools and improve opportunities for students before and after the school day. I will support increased funding for Linkages to Learning and to expand the number of schools that have school based health centers. I will also collaborate with county agencies to ensure that our spending and programs help young people with the most challenges outside of the classroom.

Regarding the curriculum and testing, MCPS and individual schools should continue to receive and incorporate parental feedback on how initiatives like Curriculum 2.0 are supporting educators and students, and schools should always be able to tailor their approaches to best meet the needs of their students.

Finally, I'll make sure that student assessments are just one of many measures of student achievement and a school's progress. As an educator, I found assessments most helpful when the data was made available to me in a timely format and helped to inform my instruction, not when assessment data was used solely for an evaluation. I also believe that the goal of our schools should be to educate the whole child, and you can't do that if you're judging teachers and children on just one metric.

What efforts do you support to make higher education accessible and affordable to all Maryland residents who aspire towards completing collegiate and advanced degrees?

If we're going to improve equity among all of our students in K-12, we need to ensure they can use those high school degrees to enroll in quality colleges. That's why I would work to strengthen our current partnerships with Montgomery College to provide more opportunities for first-generation immigrant students to earn college degrees. I'd also work to develop better

opportunities for older students who come to MCPS during high school by partnering with businesses and non-profit organizations to help them find jobs and develop employment skills.

Over 3,000 children of immigrants enter Maryland schools every year. Many of them are children of color with cultural idiosyncrasies and language accents or differences, which earn them labels such as "troublesome" or as having ADHD or other disorders. Still others end up in the juvenile justice system. What are your plans to ensure that we have a Cadre of well trained, culturally competent and sensitive teachers who understand and are willing to help these children succeed in school?

We need to ensure that immigrant students feel welcome in our schools and community. And bilingual, culturally-competent teachers are a great way to accomplish that. On the board, I would push to expand the cultural competency and diversity of teachers and central office staff, and I would promote meaningful changes in practice, policy and procedures. We should also ensure that faculty diversity matches student diversity by promoting the hiring of more teachers of color.

Additionally, while we should celebrate the fact that our county ranks first in Maryland in reducing the number of students not suspended or expelled, we must not lose sight of the extraordinary racial disparities in our discipline rates. That is why I will continue to push for fewer suspensions, which disproportionately impact students of color, as well as school discipline policies that keep children out of the school-to-prison pipeline.