

Responses of School Board Candidate Shirley Brandman to Progressive Neighbors Questionnaire

1. Do you support the use of high stakes testing (such as the Maryland MSA and HSA tests) as a way to improve the quality of education in MCPS? What would you propose as alternative methods of holding schools accountable?

I do not support high stakes testing as a way to improve the quality of education. While standardized tests can provide a relevant snapshot of student performance, they should not be relied upon as the only measure of student learning. Standardized tests are not objectively precise instruments and performance on these tests can vary due to factors not related to student mastery. Indeed, our Board of Education has been publicly critical of the Maryland's high stakes testing.

Alternative methods of holding schools accountable can include looking at individual student growth over time (or "value-added assessment"), using measures other than just standardized tests. Performance-based assessment using portfolios (collecting, for example, student writing or art), might allow us to measure student growth using authentic student work product over the school year.

2. Do you support providing enriched and innovative instruction with a rigorous curriculum to all students as a way to address the achievement gap? What changes to the current MCPS policies regarding gifted and talented instruction would you make?

As a school system, we know that there are students whose abilities may not be recognized through traditional screening. It is our responsibility to eliminate barriers to achievement and give all students access to enriched and innovative instruction with a rigorous curriculum. This is particularly compelling where data suggest an under-representation of minority students in the identified gifted and talented population. I am committed to ensuring equity and excellence for all students, which requires setting high expectations for all and supporting students so they may achieve their highest academic potential.

During this past school year, 25 MCPS elementary schools piloted the Student Instructional Program Planning and Implementation (SIPPI) process. In addition to the traditional Global screening tests administered in second grade, the SIPPI process looked at each individual student's learning profile in more depth and communicated this information to parents. This effort allows for a targeted approach that identifies students' strengths and abilities in individual disciplines. For example, a student who may be appropriately on grade level in math may be capable of acceleration in reading. The existing "gifted and talented" label does not recognize these different strengths. I support MCPS's efforts to use processes such as SIPPI to improve how we understand and program for individual students' instructional needs, not just at grade 2 but also at other key articulation points. Our focus should be on gathering data that best informs school staffs about the whole child rather than on simply labeling children as "gifted and talented." The label has not worked even to ensure that all high-achieving students have their needs met. In addition, the label leaves some students feeling that they have no gifts or talents—a patently untrue assumption.

MCPS has also designed the Honors AP Identification Tool (HAPIT) to identify secondary students who show potential for higher-level instruction but who may not be enrolled in rigorous courses. Use of the HAPIT tool is part of an effort to take down barriers. Our student's Rights and

Responsibilities handbook now provides that “all students who have the capability, motivation, or potential to accept the challenge of Honors, AP, and advanced-level courses will be accorded an opportunity to do so” (page 3 of the 2009-2010 Handbook). I strongly support the commitment to looking at a student’s untapped potential and allowing motivated students access to rigorous instruction. During my tenure, I have worked with student activists to correct instances where schools were not following through on this promise. I recognize, however, that simply increasing access to advanced, high level classes should not be the goal; rather it must be to ensure that students who take the honors, AP and IB courses complete them successfully. To this end we must ensure that we are providing adequate preparation and foundation to support success.

3. In this period of limited resources, do you support maximizing the resources devoted directly to the classroom and reducing administrative expenses? What specific changes to the current budget would you propose?

My commitment to protecting the classroom has been a guiding principle in making decisions about the budget. In FY 11, the Board of Education reorganized staff and made substantial cuts (\$6.5 million) at central office in order to minimize the impact on the classroom. Over the prior three years, MCPS eliminated 174.2 central office positions and saved \$26.3 million, more than 18% of all central office expenditures.

In the fall, the Board of Education is organizing two community discussions to talk about budget priorities in times of limited resources. All options should be on the table, including reducing administrative expenses to maximize resources devoted to the classroom. The only caveat is that reductions in administration can result in passing additional burdens and responsibilities onto school-based staff. We must continue to assess the proper balance to ensure that our administrative structure can effectively support a school system of our size.

4. Do you support initiatives to give schools and teachers greater flexibility in meeting the needs of their populations? What specific changes in current policy would you propose?

The commitment of our education reform is to make good on the promise that the quality of a student’s education does not depend upon her neighborhood. To ensure that every neighborhood school is a school of excellence, we need uniformly high expectations for all students, clearly articulated standards for achievement and a means of ensuring that students in all schools are mastering the curriculum. It is this shared commitment that makes a “school system” rather than a system of schools.

Yet, how each individual school achieves this success must take into account the unique needs of its student body. As our population increases in diversity, we must allow flexibility at the school level to effectively deliver instruction in accordance with the needs of the local student population. While we should never compromise on the results, the methods we use to get students to reach their full potential must take into account their unique strengths and challenges. Local schools, working closely with their parent communities, are in the best position to understand these needs and require some degree of flexibility to respond effectively.

5. As a BOE member, will you support the integrity of collective bargaining and negotiated contracts with MCPS employees’ unions?

I believe that commitments negotiated between the partners in education are extremely important and I would advocate vigorously to uphold the integrity of these agreements. Honoring negotiated agreements is essential to establishing and maintaining trust between educational partners that best serves our students. Nonetheless, tight fiscal times pose great challenges, especially since the Board of Education is dependent upon the County Council to fully honor the BOE's funding obligations. In times of severe economic downturn, partners may have to work together to revisit negotiated agreements as a last resort.

6. What qualities would you look for when selecting a new superintendent for MCPS next year?

The process for selecting a new superintendent for MCPS should begin with a strong community input process. It is vitally important that we as a Board get a good sense from the community of the characteristics they would like to see in a new superintendent.

I believe the next superintendent should be a visionary and a strong communicator. The school system relies upon the superintendent to inspire staff by establishing a shared vision of high expectations for all students. The next superintendent should be a leader whose vision focuses on eliminating barriers, achieving student success and nurturing graduates who are able to become responsible and productive citizens in a global society. The superintendent must respect the professionalism of teachers, administrators and support staff and welcome their input in formulating this vision. Without a well-articulated shared vision we cannot ensure that teachers, administrators and support staff feel invested in the school system's work. The superintendent must also value and expand partnerships between schools, families and communities, engaging them to support and nurture MCPS's vision through sustained effort and involvement.

In addition, the superintendent, along with the Board of Education, serves as a key voice for our school system and must work with our County Council and our State Legislature to vigorously advocate on behalf of our students. This requires both patience and the ability to listen and engage in extended discussion and debate. The superintendent must be as willing to admit our system's shortcomings as s/he is to celebrate our system's accomplishments. Such candor builds credibility. Earning the support of the larger community depends upon the superintendent's openness and effectiveness in conveying the stories of our 140,000 students – their hopes, their dreams and their potential—so that we come together to provide the resources to nurture their success.

7. Do you support the Piney Branch Elementary School's PTA Young Activist Club's fully funded proposal to pilot a dishwasher and reusable trays? If you are an incumbent candidate, please comment on why the Board of Education has so far refused to consider this proposal on an official basis during a Board of Education meeting.

I applaud the Young Activist Club members for their dedicated advocacy and have told them so when I spoke with some of their members at an event in Silver Spring. I absolutely share their concern about the environmental impact of Styrofoam. In fact, I believe we should aim larger, and remove Styrofoam not just from Piney Branch Elementary but from all schools and county government facilities. After speaking with community members, staff and other elected officials, I believe the best course of action is to pursue this goal in a comprehensive way across the county.

The Young Activists have done an incredible job of raising funds and awareness about this issue. Despite several attempts, however, we have not been able to reach a meeting of the minds on the actual costs and risks associated with their plan to install a used dishwasher. I am simply not willing to take a risk that children could be harmed. Instead of installing one used dishwasher, a plan which they acknowledge cannot be replicated at other schools, I would like to work with the Young Activists to explore alternatives. Early in the process, MCPS asked the Young Activists to use their funds to replace Styrofoam trays with pressed paper or cardboard trays that are capable of being recycled. This is a solution which could be replicated system wide, and would have a much farther reaching positive impact on the environment.

It is my hope that the Young Activists will be open to discussing this or other more comprehensive solutions to this important problem. My goal is to find common ground so that we can unite our advocacy efforts toward a viable, sustainable outcome. As a Board member, I am deeply committed to greening our schools and am pleased that MCPS has already significantly increased paper recycling and energy efficiency as part of our larger and ongoing environmental efforts.