

Smith - Mayor

AFT-Maryland Candidate Questionnaire for Baltimore City Races

The AFT-Maryland is a federation of local unions of the AFT within the state, including the Baltimore Teachers Union and the City Union of Baltimore—whose members work for the city—as well as state employee members of the Maryland Professional Employees Council, AFT Healthcare—Maryland, the Maryland Classified Employees Association, and Maryland School for the Deaf. Together, with the Baltimore County Federation of Public Employees and the Baltimore County Federation of Public Health Nurses, AFT-Maryland has thousands of members who are citizens of the city of Baltimore, as well as thousands of members who work to make Baltimore a better place for its residents.

The AFT-Maryland has prepared the following questionnaire for candidates running for office in Baltimore City as a means to familiarize the candidates with issues that our members care about most. It also allows us the chance to see where the candidates stand on these issues.

AFT-Maryland locals participate fully in the endorsement process of the Metropolitan Baltimore AFL-CIO Council; the council will announce its final endorsements sometime in Late February 2020. However, because we are a large contingency within the Baltimore AFL-CIO, the unions of the AFT-Maryland have a heavy influence on who Labor chooses as its candidates for endorsement.

Please take the time to complete this candidate questionnaire by no later than January 17th, 2020, at 5:00 p.m.

If you have any questions, please contact Todd Reynolds, AFT-Maryland Political Coordinator, at 410-764-3030 or treynolds@aftmd.org.

Email address *



Candidate Information

Name

T.J. Smith

Candidate for:

Mayor

Home address

City, ZIP code

Phone

Email address

Present occupation

Full-Time Candidate for Mayor

Employer

N/A

Party affiliation

Democrat

Have you ever been endorsed by a labor union? If so, which one(s) and when?

First time running for office, no.

Have you ever held elected office? If so, when?

No.

Candidate Questionnaire

Please note the AFT-Maryland plans to make these questionnaires public. Only candidates agreeing to this provision are eligible to be invited to any future AFT-Maryland Candidate forum for the 2020 Election.

General Questions

1. The AFT-Maryland is a federation of numerous public employee unions, including Baltimore city educators (Baltimore Teachers Union, or BTU, Local 340) and municipal employees (City Union of Baltimore, or CUB, Local 800). Why should we support your campaign?

Attached is a video of me testifying in reference to the preservation of benefits:

<https://youtu.be/f2jZja9cXXU>

This dates back approximately 10 years.

I am a candidate who is from outside of the political world and who wants to make the best decisions for working class Baltimoreans, regardless of "political" ramifications. I am a union member. I joined my first union when I had a short stint working as a teenager at Martin's Caterers. I later joined the FOP when I began my career as a police officer in Anne Arundel County. I have been on the front lines in Annapolis, fighting with my brothers and sisters of other unions.

"Eighty percent of the population voted for this arbitration," said Sgt. T.J. Smith of the Anne Arundel County Police Department. "You guys are trying to give something away that we need and they voted for."

<https://patch.com/maryland/edgewater/county-council-delays-vote-on-binding-arbitration-2>

As you can see, I have never shied away from doing the right thing and fighting for what was right. It was never about me, it was always about the greater good.

2. Have you ever been a member of a labor union? If yes, please give the name and date.

Yes, FOP Lodge #70 1999-present.

Questions on Worker Rights

3. Collective bargaining for city employees: Should Baltimore City librarians and those who work for the Enoch Pratt Public Library System be granted the right to engage in collective bargaining? Should employees of the Baltimore Convention Center be granted the right to collective bargaining? If you are elected to office, will you work to expand collective bargaining rights to municipal employees who currently do not have that right?

Yes, both the Enoch Pratt Library workers and the Convention Center employees should have the right to collectively bargain and I will support those rights and do what is in my power to assist in expanding bargaining rights to municipal employees. Allowing the other employees to participate in collective bargaining creates a more equitable workforce.

4. Minimum wage: In the 2019 Legislative session, the state passed a minimum wage law that excluded tipped workers and did not link the minimum wage to inflation. In addition, the state's minimum wage won't reach \$15 per hour until 2025. Would you be in favor of Baltimore City linking the minimum wage to inflation, and removing the exclusion for tipped workers? Would you be in favor of removing the delay and closing these loopholes in raising the minimum wage?

I was in Annapolis to support the minimum wage increase in 2019. I was instrumental in working with the Baltimore County Executive to produce videos to advertise and vote and support for the increase. I would work with our Baltimore delegation, particularly Sen. Cory McCray who championed the minimum wage increase, to support state legislation to link the minimum wage to inflation as well as removing the exclusion for tipped workers. I support a fiscally responsible path to removing the delay in closing these loopholes.

5. Retirement for city workers - Defined Benefit versus Defined Contribution: The City of Baltimore has in the past discussed moving from a defined benefit to a defined contribution plan (401k) for its employees' retirement. Do you support such a move? Why or why not?

Workers rights should be protected based on what was agreed to upon hire. I was part of a pension system for most of my career, so I appreciate and support the Defined Benefit. I would work to support this in the best interest of fairness.

This is something that I would negotiate with the unions to see what they feel is of most value to employees. I personally believe that the defined contribution allows for more flexibility for employees where the defined benefit might lack the flexibility.

6. Retirement benefits for educators and city workers: Over the past few years, retired educators and employees of Baltimore City have had concerns that, just as the state did to its public workers, the city will discontinue the retiree prescription drug benefit and move all retirees to Medicare Part D for prescriptions. If elected to office, do you pledge to never vote to move retired educators and city employees to Medicare Part D for their prescription benefits?

My mother and several members of my family have been educators. I can absolutely and unequivocally say that I would never support moving these employees to Medicare Part D. For all that they do, we have an obligation to do what we can, locally, to assist with the costs of prescription drugs.

7. Safe working conditions for city employees: This past year, a number of city employees have been severely injured—and in at least one case, killed—on the job. Whether it be Transportation Safety Officers merely directing traffic, DPW workers inspecting our water reclamation systems, or Department of Transportation officers needing to repair damaged roads—all employees deserve the right to work in safe conditions. Far too often, city workers feel the leadership of various city departments are either unaware of or completely ignore workplace safety protocols. If you are elected to office in Baltimore City, will you support a law requiring the various city departments to partner with Maryland Occupational Safety and Health to do a no-cost, wall-to-wall inspection of all city workplace facilities to help identify potential employee safety hazards?

As a former supervisor and commander, I often filled out workers compensation forms and related material. It was standard that I communicated such to MOSHA and OSHA. I firmly believe partnerships are a necessary part of the workplace. I have the good fortune of having worked in three major jurisdictions. It saddens me that this is even necessary as a question or even needed as a law. It is a culture that needs to change to simply do the right thing for its employees. I would support a law or any other form of accountability to ensure this happens.

Public Education in Baltimore City

8. General: What do you think are the three biggest problems facing Baltimore City public schools? If elected, how will you solve these problems?

Infrastructure, Budget Accountability, and Safety.

My mother, my son's mother, and many of my family members are teachers. I've watched over my entire life as they have used their own money to ensure educational outcomes are met. They do this because they care. Our teachers deserve more support from all of the funding that is being allocated. Ensuring budgetary needs are being met by funds getting into the classrooms so that teachers and students have the equipment and resources necessary to produce positive educational outcomes. We cannot allow large amounts of funding to be tied up in administrative offices and not make it to the classroom.

The climate in the classrooms in various seasons is not conducive for learning in older buildings. We have discussed this in Baltimore City for too many years. In 1991, I was a student at Poly. We organized a walkout then, because we could not wear shorts and tee shirts. We were successful where we were able to wear shorts and tee shirts on extremely hot days. In 2019, Poly was still closing early because of air conditioning. While this appears to finally be getting resolved, this speaks to the lack of accountability on focusing on the students and the teachers inside of the classrooms. My administration will ensure all schools are properly outfitted with heating and air conditioning and this will be among my top priorities.

Budget Accountability: With the fair student funding formula schools are competing with one another for basic resources which leaves schools struggling to adequately staff for instruction and safety. We will address these inequities under my administration to ensure all schools are able to provide proper staff in a safe environment.

9. Appointments to the City School Board: Just recently, a law was passed that gave the mayor (but not the city council) more authority in choosing the members of the city's school board. What role do you think the city council should play in this process? What should be the qualities Baltimore should prioritize in choosing a member of the city's school board? Would you commit to only support a candidate for local school board with at least 3 years of classroom experience (as a teacher, or a teacher's aide, for example) working in a public school system?

I believe you should have a level of experience in the classroom to run for a school board seat. I will work with the City Council to allow their voices to be heard in part of the process.

It is imperative that we have a board with requisite experience in the environments that we are asking them to make decisions about. I personally believe that in order to keep the right checks and balances and diversity of experience, we need to ensure experienced professionals are on the board. It would also be relevant to ensure someone with recent experience serves on the board. Teaching or leading 20 years ago is not the same as classroom/school experience today and we should be mindful of that.

10. Baltimore City School Board: In 2022, Baltimore City will finally be allowed to vote two additional members to the school board. Baltimore City is currently the only jurisdiction in the state whose entire School Board of Commissioners is appointed. In 2022 the board will expand from 10 to 12 seats, with the two additional seats being elected rather than appointed. Of the 23 other Maryland County School Boards, 19 are fully elected, and four are an appointed/elected hybrid, with only Wicomico County having more appointed than elected positions. If elected, would you support legislation transitioning Baltimore City to a fully elected or hybrid board with the majority of seats being elected? What is the optimal structure for Baltimore City's School Board and why?

I support a hybrid approach to the school board with the majority being elected. The people deserve a "say" in who their school board representatives are. I believe a hybrid approach is a responsible way of ensuring the needs of the community are met through their selection of the representatives who will make up the majority of the board. We will also recommend term limits on members.

11. Student and staff safety: A number of recent, high-profile incidents of violence in our schools have drawn attention to questions of student discipline. Additionally, in surveys to families about reservations on enrolling their children in a BCPSS school, student safety is cited as their #1 concern. Generally, employees of the school system have questioned the current code of conduct as ineffective, whereby students are suspended from school only to return when the suspension is over with the same underlying issues. Are there any revisions to the code of conduct for student behavior that you feel should be considered?

The safety of all of those who live, work, are educated, or enjoy Baltimore is my top priority. It is completely disheartening to watch what has occurred in our city and in our schools over the last several years. As a former Baltimore City Schools' student, I remember when accountability standards were in place where we couldn't bring pagers to school without fear of being expelled. The safety of students, teachers, and staff is paramount. We must hold students accountable for their actions, especially those who are violent. This only protects other students, teachers, and staff. At the same time, we cannot over expel or suspend students for trivial conduct. Any code of conduct must be clear and followed consistently in order to be effective. Any discipline also needs to be equitable. We can not fix a problem by creating another one. I also favor in school suspension where students come to school but they serve their suspension away from their regular class with specially trained staff who supervise. We should continue to give our children every opportunity to learn while ensuring a safe and productive learning environment.

12. Baltimore's population loss has contributed to enrollment declines in City Schools. Lower enrollment has also been caused by under-investment fueled by systemic racism that's lowered the quality of City Schools' programming. As part of the 21st Century Schools initiative, Baltimore was required to close a number of schools in order to qualify for renovation funds. School closures have also been triggered by low achievement, as part of the district's portfolio approach to schools. These policies have resulted in a disproportionate number of vacant schools in black neighborhoods that are already under-resourced. If elected, what is your plan to utilize these potential community resources?

The lack of equity is one of the most dangerous situations in the city that has fueled the systemic and long term problems that exist in our city. I want to repurpose some of the closed school buildings as a multi use building serving the community. My administration will invest in creating additional urban gardens where the community can grow food and use it as a source of fresh fruits and vegetables. We will continue to expand our 21st century schools to ensure our students have the tools they need to grow in Baltimore City. My administration is already planning for a pilot program to expand the community schools concept where each quadrant of the city would have schools where families could get all, most, or many of the supports they need in one location or locations with close proximity (social services, healthcare, education, training for parents).

13. In Baltimore, as across the nation, school zones and neighborhood boundaries have historically served to limit access to high quality public schools. While Baltimore City Public Schools students in middle and high school are assigned to schools through a complicated “school choice” process, students in elementary schools are still largely assigned to schools based on enrollment zones. These zones were created over a generation ago, and in the years since, population shifts (notably large growth southeast Baltimore of the English Language Learner population, which required additional services and support) have resulted in several schools being overcrowded, while others are under-enrolled. Additionally, the school district’s Equity Policy requires it to examine its plans and practices to determine and address the ways they exacerbate racial and economic inequity. In order to meet the needs of Baltimore families, and move towards a more just and equitable school system, a comprehensive redistricting plan should be completed, involving the coordination of the Baltimore City Planning Department and Baltimore City Public Schools. However, changing neighborhood boundaries causes significant public backlash. If elected, would you support school redistricting and would you direct the Baltimore City Planning Department to partner with City Schools to create a comprehensive plan?

Complacency has cheated out students and educators out of opportunity. We must comprehensively revisit the entire process of school equity. Our school system, much like the city itself, is still operating as if the city has the population of the past. This is a mindset that must change and that is why I am also in support of forensic audits of Baltimore City Public Schools. We will conduct a full review of all current operations and devise a true 21st century plan and vision for Baltimore City Schools to ensure our students and educators are in the best situation for successful and meaningful outcomes. The Smith Administration would have the planning department partner with city schools to create a comprehensive plan on this issue.

14. Public Charter Schools: There are 50 public charter schools in the state of Maryland, the vast majority of which are in Baltimore City. Some charter school operators would like to weaken state law to make the teachers and staff at the charter employees of the charter non-profit board, not the school system. This would remove all protections that the teachers and staff have under the BTU collective bargaining agreement. Should charter school teachers and staff be considered employees of the charter school board or the city’s public school board?

Charter school employees should remain employees of City Schools. They deserve their rights and protections under the BTU, but also because it requires that they are in compliance with expectations like certification, attending professional training required by the state for local education agencies and education related legislation.

15. Should there be a cap on the number of charter schools in Baltimore City? Why or why not?

Yes, there should be a cap on the number of charter schools in Baltimore City. We have to focus on accountability and outcomes. As it stands, having an unlimited number of charter schools could lead to less accountability and governance. We have to ensure Baltimore City children possess the tools to be successful not just in school but able to apply what they have learned in college or a trade school.

16. BOOST/School Vouchers: Should government give vouchers (either as a tax credit or even a tax rebate) to parents who want to send their children to a private school?

I do not believe government vouchers should be given to parents who elect to send their children to private schools. Our schools need investment and should be the top priority of the City Council and will be with my administration.

17. Education funding: Some in Annapolis have argued that Baltimore City should be contributing more to its public school system than is currently budgeted. The city ranks among the worst in Maryland when it comes to the local contribution to its public school system; while on average a county in Maryland contributes roughly 36% of its annual operating budget to its local school system, in Baltimore, the city contributes only 14% of its budget to its schools. The Kirwan Commission is recommending the city increase its contribution by \$300 million, more than doubling its current contribution.

17(a) How large of an increase, percentage wise, should Baltimore City commit in its budget to funding public schools?

Undoubtedly, the Baltimore City government should contribute more to education. The disproportionate funding between the police department and schools speaks directly to the priorities, or lack thereof, of the city government. I stand firm with a fiscally responsible budgetary path to raising the City contribution to schools to be in line with the average of the county governments.

17(b) In order to meet Kirwan obligations, how would you propose raising that additional \$300 million?

The Kirwan recommendations are critically important and our city has an obligation to ensure the funding is available to adequately enact the measures. We will have to be creative in finding revenue streams. One of the first things I would do is commission an audit to ensure every penny available to the government is accounted for. We will look for waste, fraud and abuse of taxpayer money within Baltimore City departments. My administration will be fiscally responsible and ensure that all agencies find ways to reduce spending in order for us to ensure we meet the financial needs of our Kirwan commitment. As I have said before and I will say again, education is the cornerstone to safe and healthy communities. Our investment is necessary, but our monitoring of the investments and our focus on the outcomes is just as important.

18. In every school district in Maryland the head of the school system is the Superintendent of public schools. However, in the two majority minority school systems—Baltimore City and Prince George’s County—the head of the school system is instead titled the CEO of public schools. This title change, while subtle, has been significant: since the switch to a more corporate-based model with this title change, these two districts have seen a substantial portion of their schools become charters, and an overall explosion in the amount of standardized testing has followed. If elected to office, will you be in favor of returning the title of the head of our public school system to “Superintendent” so as to be identical with other school districts in Maryland? Why or why not?

I would change it back to Superintendent. This is not a corporation and our children aren’t “things” that a corporate boss produces. Language has meaning and carries weight. Our “business” is preparing children for life and that spirit is lost.

Vision for Baltimore City

19. Privatization: Recently, CUB and AFT-Maryland worked with the City Council and Food and Water Watch to pass a city charter amendment that would prohibit our water from ever being privatized. Are there other resources that are owned by the city that you believe should never be privatized? When, if ever, do you feel it is appropriate to privatize public services or property?

Other resources such as the Department of Transportation, Department of General Services, workers compensation commissions, education, police, and fire etc... should never be privatized.

I do not believe that Baltimore needs to privatize any of its public services or property.

20. Development: In 2016, the city passed a multi-billion dollar re-development plan, supported by a \$535 million TIF request to develop Port Covington. Opponents worried development projects such as these, funded through public tax revenues, will be used not to the betterment of all in the city, but instead to the betterment of wealthy elites, widening the gap between the haves and have-nots in Baltimore. Do you have a vision for development in Baltimore City that...

20(a) ...assures neighborhoods will contain equitable amounts of low-income and affordable housing?

Absolutely. Gentrification is a terrible situation that has occurred to some cities around this country. We cannot group poor people on top of poor people and expect to have strong communities when we know through history that approach has failed. As part of my vision for investments in Baltimore, those who want to do business with the city must be willing to do business with our neighborhoods through investing. We will not hand out multimillion dollar TIF's that do not have funding that goes directly back into communities in Baltimore.

20(b) ...will help the city improve its financial contribution to its public school system?

As part of my commitment to education beyond Kirwan, I plan to increase our educational spending to be in line with that of the counties. A portion of those increases will come from development investors in Baltimore. We will be very specific and intentional about our parameters to do business in Baltimore. We will also use these opportunities to ensure our children have access to "themes" in school that fit the new industries that are being created here in Baltimore, like Port Covington, the Port of Baltimore, and Tradeport Atlantic.

20(c) ...will be completed by workers who live in and around the Baltimore region, and follow prevailing wage standards and project-labor agreements?

I am a union supporter and union member. My plan includes deliberate allocations and investments for local, minority, and union businesses. These investments help us stabilize our communities and grow the working class families.

20(d) ...will contain businesses that must follow labor peace agreements?

I am not a politician. I want people to work and I don't want to simply please developers. We need sustainable employment opportunities that allow our young people to have a multitude of employment opportunities. Ensuring a fair opportunity for labor unions to work with private companies is a critical part of my plans and what I believe. If a private corporation needs government funding for their project they will have to ensure local unions have the opportunity to have some of the available jobs.

21. Affordable housing: Recently, CUB worked with legislators in Annapolis to pass legislation that would allow the city to grant low-income city employees a property tax credit on their homes. Affordable housing is a priority for city educators as well, as there are more homeless students in Baltimore city than there are total students in some county districts. What is your plan to increase accessibility to quality, stable housing in Baltimore city?

The Smith Administration will be creative in addressing the inequity in housing in Baltimore. We will immediately introduce plans for reinvestment into the dilapidated homes in our city. We will offer considerable incentives to address this issue with the homes, while at the same time, requiring these investors to create affordable housing opportunities. A rent cap is also necessary in Baltimore. I support taxed based incentives for city workers and I will advocate for such.

22. Crime: Do improved education and expanded city services play significant roles in your plan to reduce crime in Baltimore city? If so, how?

Yes they do play a significant role in my administration. I believe every Baltimore City child deserves a world class education. I believe students thrive in smaller class sizes and with individualized attention from teachers and support staff. Ensuring teachers have the tools they need to teach in a centerpiece of accountability. Brining social services, trauma counselors, and other agencies together to ensure children get the services they need is paramount.

Part of my overall plan, because all of this is tied together, is expanding the community schools concept through partnerships. Our children deserve to have safe options beyond the school day. The more opportunity young people have to be active and engaging, the less they will turn to violence as an alternative.

Teachers are often children’s first interaction with an authority figure beyond adults in their families. Having good, safe interactions with teachers helps students have better interactions with other adults, including the police. When we hold students (and families) accountable for student success in addition to teachers and administrators we are preparing them for life beyond K-12 education.

Investments in education are the cornerstone to truly healthy and safe communities, but we have a responsibility as leaders to be specific and intentional about those investments and the expected outcomes.

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this candidate questionnaire. If you have any questions, please contact Todd Reynolds, AFT-Maryland Political Coordinator, at (410) 764-3030, or treynolds@aftmd.org.



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