

Vignarajah- 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 *

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Candidate Information

Name

Thiru Vignarajah

Candidate for:

Mayor

Home address

City, ZIP code

Phone

Email address

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Present occupation

Attorney

Employer

DLA Piper

Party affiliation

Democrat

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

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?

I will fight tirelessly for teachers. This is not an abstract political commitment; my parents are retired Baltimore City school teachers, and the Teachers Union stood up for them when no one else would. My life would not have been the same if unions had not protected the rights of my parents.

I also believe you should support our campaign because I share your values and have committed to improve conditions in schools not just for students, but for teachers and principals, as well as for the staff and counselors who work in city schools every day. Within a month of announcing my campaign, I pledged to become the first city in America that without federal or state approval would legalize and tax marijuana. We earmarked that revenue (1) to guarantee universal pre-K for three- and four-year-old children, (2) to guarantee free college for graduates of Baltimore City public high schools at community colleges, trade schools, and public and private universities in Maryland, (3) for repairs and maintenance that are currently absorbed by principals' budgets, and (4) to grow the endowments of HBCUs, which for too long have lagged behind other state colleges and universities.

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

No. I was, however, the beneficiary of the critical work that unions have done in Baltimore. Union representatives stood up for my parents, who were immigrants and susceptible to undue pressure and unfair practices by supervisors and staff. Unions stood up for them when no one else would. Their long tenure as teachers and public servants became not just the foundation of my life, but also the model I have sought to emulate and follow.

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. Librarians and employees of the Baltimore Convention Center should both be entitled to the benefits of collective bargaining. Unions are beneficial for employees in industries where the power dynamics are stark, where transient employment is common, and where legal redress by individuals is difficult to obtain. Consistent with these principles, I would advocate to responsibly expand collective bargaining opportunities for public and private sector employees.

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?

The loopholes should be closed, and the minimum wage should be pegged to inflation. These changes should be part of updated state law changes.

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?

Pensions are a promise. Our priority has to be ensuring those who spent 20+ years serving our city are able to retire with dignity. Our city has almost two billion dollars in unfunded pension liabilities and the mayor's first priority must be safeguarding retirees and career public servants.

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?

Yes. City retirees ought to be guaranteed the benefits they were assured as part of their employment here in Baltimore. That should not be modified, altered, or renegotiated without the express written assent of each individual. Pension is a promise, and it is not one Baltimore should break. It is unfair to retirees, it creates uncertainty in employment negotiations, and it disincentives individuals to work for Baltimore City at a time when we need to recruit and retain the best and brightest.

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?

Yes. Safe working conditions must be an absolute prerequisite for good businesses and government. Every employer should consider employee safety its top priority; municipal government is no exception, and the City of Baltimore is certainly no exception. As part of a comprehensive audit of all city agencies, we will catalog and address potential employee safety hazards in each agency.

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?

Declining enrollment, teacher shortages, and crumbling infrastructure.

(1) Student enrollment in public schools continues to decline; this is both a cause and consequence of our system's struggles. My commitment to universal pre-K and free college for city high school graduates is not only meant to benefit the children who participate, but also to encourage those families planning to flee Baltimore City public schools to reconsider their decision. Without access to high quality pre-K, students arrive in kindergarten already behind their peers. It is difficult to play catch-up. Educating our City's children starting at the age of three not only gives them a substantial advantage in intellectual growth, but the results compound year after year as well. This is a trajectory that will improve the collective cultures of our elementary grades and in all subsequent school years.

(2) With hundreds of teachers leaving Baltimore City Public Schools every year, Baltimore is facing a serious teacher shortfall that negatively impacts students' quality of education and teachers' quality of work. Educators should be compensated and treated as befitting the crucial role they play in society. In order to combat teacher shortfalls, we need to make the position more competitive, appealing, and growth-orientated. Teachers should receive opportunities for advancement and collaboration throughout their careers. If we elevate the teaching profession, we will expand the pool of talent pursuing teaching as a vocation.

(3) Too many of Baltimore's schools have crumbling infrastructure, from leaky roofs and fractured foundations to insufficient heat and air conditioning systems. Substandard facilities are not only harmful to our students' health and safety, they are disrespectful to the children, the families, community and the culture at-large. These capital improvements cannot be borne by individual schools and must be part of a comprehensive investment by the city (and the state) in the future of education in Baltimore.

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?

The City Council should provide input and be fully engaged in the selection of school board nominees, but the Mayor should ultimately be responsible for these appointments. If the schools are not performing as they should, it should be the mayor with whom ultimate responsibility for those failures lies. Spreading this responsibility across multiple institutions allows leaders to point fingers and deflect blame. That must end. I pledge that the City's school board will include at least one current Baltimore teacher, one parent of a Baltimore student, and principals (or former principals) of a public charter school. School boards should seek to assemble a range of diverse perspectives and expertise. This should include curricular expertise as to best practices for teaching in Baltimore; it should include management and budgetary expertise in order to assess schools financial position; it should include an understanding of Baltimore's diverse communities; it should include extensive classroom experience to appreciate the unique experiences and challenges children bring with them to the classroom setting; and it should include perspectives receptive to new proposals so that the approach we have always taken is not the only approach available for discussion.

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 would support a hybrid model. The public should have a say in the composition of the school board by selecting a number of the members. At the same time, we should not allow the process to be overly politicized. Ultimately, the Mayor's appointment powers guarantees that he or she is held responsible for the performance of the school system. A hybrid achieves the goal of ensuring clear lines of responsibility that end with the Mayor, but also facilitates robust public discussions and sufficient public input. Until the school board transitions to a hybrid model, I will appoint individuals to serve on the school board based on their merit and backgrounds. This will include BCPS parents, educators, and individuals from the nonprofit world with deep backgrounds in education.

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?

Disciplinary actions by schools must consider the safety of all students, teachers, and school employees. However, removing students from schools should be the option of last resort. The code of conduct fails to provide alternatives to suspension that address the root cause of the behavior that prompted the suspension. This requires a holistic approach that recognizes the complexities of a student's behavior and provides alternative outlets and resources. We have supported expanding community schools that can provide more resources to students by involving parents, family members, and partners in the community. These schools are identifiable, familiar institutions. By investing heavily in their creation and expansion, we can connect some of Baltimore's most disadvantaged families and children to resources, training, childcare, and other social services. Across all schools, teachers and staff must be trained to implement restorative justice practices, like those that have flourished at, for example, City Springs Elementary. Restorative justice establishes a framework to deal with a crisis before the crisis happens by encouraging students to discuss problems in a safe and constructive manner. This is a superior alternative to disciplinary actions in many cases.

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?

These facilities are a significant asset for the City and should be repurposed for functions and facilities consonant with their original educational mission. Adult learning centers, recreation centers, and community centers are examples of how these facilities could be productively reconceived. Ultimately, the goal has to be to halt the decline and reverse the student population trends that have forced school closures in the first place. Placing critical community assets in the very neighborhoods where the disinvestment has taken place is one part of a broader antidote that is needed in Baltimore.

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?

Yes, I would support school redistricting. This is no doubt a lightning rod for controversy but creating schools with diverse student populations must be a long-term objective in Baltimore. I served as a law clerk to Justice Stephen Breyer the year the Supreme Court rendered its landmark school resegregation in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. 1*. Justice Breyer wrote an impassioned, definitive dissent that explained the profound dangers of de facto desegregated schools. Baltimore is a case study in these dangers. For the school system that educated Thurgood Marshall not to have the vision of democracy and public education that he advocated as one of its central commitments should be a source of shame. Redistricting, however painful a process, will need to happen if we are ever to create out of many neighborhoods and many people, one city.

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 teachers should be school system employees. This arrangement is one of the compromises that has lessened the tensions between the Teachers Union and the charter school movement. It allows for teachers to be true partners in the management of a combined public/charter system and allows for innovation and negotiations that in other cities is impossible. Altering that dynamic is a mistake. We have an opportunity to develop a new vision of the role public charter schools can play in public education. Creating political obstacles to that is imprudent and unnecessary.

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

No. Artificial constraints on public charter schools when we consistently see poor performances in too many public schools is unwarranted. Even as we support and strengthen existing public schools by empowering local leaders and local school councils to make the innovations they believe are best for their student population and the communities they serve, we should also create ample opportunity for public charter options to flourish. All of these schools have to be given a chance to thrive and arbitrary restrictions only discourage and delay the progress we need in Baltimore City schools.

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?

No. The objective should be to make Baltimore's public schools attractive to parents of all backgrounds. That requires investment in our public and public charter schools, not lowering costs of doing business among private schools. We should make sure we are encouraging public charter schools and additional alternatives within the public school system; private schools in Baltimore, overall, do not need our help.

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?

Baltimore City should guarantee that Kirwan is fully funded. This does not require an increase in property taxes, which in fact we have pledged to cut in half over ten years.

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

I believe we remain the only campaign that has publicly outlined our plan to raise the requisite funds for Kirwan. A threshold step for Kirwan is an audit of city agencies including the school system to make sure policies and procedures are not being abused and to evaluate what exactly the budgetary shortfall is. To ensure full funding of these commitments, we have pledged to become the first city in America to legalize and tax marijuana, the proceeds of which will be used to provide universal pre-K, which is a cornerstone of Kirwan. We will also raise taxes on abandoned property, as D.C. has done, to prompt development or the sale of the property to someone who will develop it. We will make sure casinos provide their fair share, accounting for an 8-year period during which casino revenue was not ultimately augmenting the schools budget.

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?

Yes. Titles matter: the superintendent label both better reflects the kind of public servant we need to have in that role, and it allows us to recruit a top leader in education.

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?

Public works and public utilities should not be subject to privatization. These are institutions whose principal responsibility is to help Baltimore run, not to turn a profit. Baltimore City is and should be responsible for providing water, including timely distribution and accurate collection of bills; trash disposal from dumpsters currently overflowing; and paving potholes throughout our streets. Our leaders are failing to effectively provide these services. I have called for a citywide audit of all agencies to identify why these critical public services fail to meet the needs of Baltimore.

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?

Yes, we have committed to lowering property taxes across the city, not just subsidizing corporate developers through TIFs. Second, we need to encourage development in neighborhoods that have suffered disinvestment. While few incentives are needed around Baltimore's Harbor and its accompanying waterways, City Hall could do much more to promote development in neighborhoods from Edmondson Village to Park Heights, from Cherry Hill to Oliver Street. We will also seize and sell property with excessive code violations and unpaid taxes, and transfer those properties to affordable housing organizations, thereby raising additional revenue and creating affordable housing.

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

Yes, fully funding Kirwan must be an essential commitment for our next mayor. I have pledged to raise revenue by becoming the first city in America to regulate and tax marijuana, earmarking the proceeds of this revenue stream for educational purposes. We will also raise taxes on abandoned property both stimulating development and raising revenue.

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

Yes, there are five major infrastructure priorities that will require labor from local markets. First, we will rebuild the roads and bridges that are crumbling into the ground. Second, we will rebuild the water and sewage system, which is currently in violation of federal law and the subject of a federal consent decree. Third, we will rebuild our antiquated school facilities, which on average are twice as old as facilities in the rest of the State. Fourth, we will pursue major transit infrastructure like high-speed rail between Baltimore and D.C. Fifth, we will establish the foundation for future infrastructure involving, for example, free wireless access throughout the city. Contractors working on these projects will be required to have a state certified apprenticeship program, and preference will be given to prospective employers committing to hiring Baltimore City residents as well as individuals with prior engagements with the criminal justice system.

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

Unions must have access to employees in order to organize and adequately negotiate in the best interest of their members. Labor peace agreements provide an opportunity for businesses to demonstrate that they respect and appreciate the vital role of unions in forming a high-performing and stable labor force. The agreement between employers and unions confirms that organizations can work together to create optimal outcomes for all parties.

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?

Baltimore City faces a crisis due to a lack of affordable housing, which is only compounded by investment concentrated in select pockets of the City. We need to encourage development in every neighborhood and every corner of Baltimore. This certainly requires partnerships with developers, as well as proactive action from City Hall. We will build emergency shelter housing without limitations of the duration of stay; invest and support community land trusts; remove zoning restrictions that pose barriers to new affordable housing units; enforce restrictions requiring developers to build affordable housing in high opportunity areas; and create programs to assist seniors safely and securely "aging in place" with rent protection. Revitalizing the development of affordable housing across Baltimore requires a concentrated, deliberate effort from all stakeholders.

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

Frederick Douglass once said, "it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." This is why we have pledged to guarantee universal pre-K and debt-free college, and have committed to converting elementary schools into community schools. We also have to expand diversion of low-level offenders to programs that allow them to develop skills and obtain employment. A couple months ago, we unveiled the "Court to Career" program. It requires as a condition of probation that the person pursues an apprenticeship and then is paired with a meaningful job with advancement opportunities. These services can drive down recidivism and break the cycle of poverty and prison.

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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