

Harris-Crest - Dist. 4

## 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](mailto:treynolds@aftmd.org).

Email address \*



Candidate Information

Name

Nicole Harris-Crest

Candidate for:

Baltimore City Council, District 4

Home address

City, ZIP code

Phone

Email address

Present occupation

Chief of External Affairs

Employer

Office of the State's Attonrey for Baltimore

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?

AFT-Maryland should support my campaign because I share many of the union's ideals and desires for our beloved City. I have worked in the business, nonprofit and government sectors. Throughout my personal life and professional career, I have advocated for and supported policies to improve public safety and reduce crime, provide employment and resources to the less fortunate, improve educational opportunities for our students, and revitalize our neighborhoods. My experience, coupled with my innovative nature, allows me to champion and lead in the collective fight to build a city where all residents have the opportunity to thrive. As a homicide survivor, I have been directly impacted in a significant way by the lack of progress in our City. As such, I understand the tremendous cost it has on individuals, families, communities and generations. Moreover, I understand the sense of urgency required to move these issues forward. Despite these obstacles, I remain committed to our City and the fight necessary to work today to create a better future.

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

No

## 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?

Baltimore City librarians and those who work for the Enoch Pratt Public Library System should be granted the right to engage in public bargaining. Employees of the Baltimore Convention Center should also be granted the right to collective bargaining. Collective bargaining has many advantages, as it can offer a means to resolve workplace problems, improve the quality and cost of worker's compensation and benefits, ensure safe working conditions, and provide increased job security for employees. If elected, I will work to expand collective bargaining rights to municipal employees who do not have that right.

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 would be in favor of Baltimore City linking the minimum wage to inflation, and removing the exclusion for tipped workers. I would also be in favor of removing the delay and closing the loopholes in raising the minimum wage. Employers must provide a livable wage for their employees.

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?

No. I would not support the City of Baltimore's decision to move from a defined benefit to a defined contribution plan (401k). Defined benefit plans provide employees with a specified payment amount at retirement based on their salary and years of service. These plans offer more stability and do not place the burden of retirement savings on employees. On the other hand, under a defined contribution plan, employees and employers may contribute funds to save for an employee's retirement. Defined benefit plans provide retirees more stability and protect employees from stock market volatility.

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?

If elected, I pledge never to vote to move retired educators and city employees to Medicare Part D for their prescription benefits. I have personally watched my elderly grandparents struggle with the cost of prescription drugs. After years of service, retired educators and city employees should receive the benefit of prescription drug coverage through the City.

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. I will support a law requiring the various city departments to partner with the 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. Employee safety is of paramount importance and must be a priority. We cannot value productivity and cost-efficiency at the expense of employee safety.

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?

The three most significant problems facing Baltimore City Public Schools are (1) inadequate funding, (2) low academic achievement in students, and (3) lack of wraparound services for students. As councilwoman, I would take the following steps to solve these problems:

#### Inadequate Funding

Baltimore City Public Schools must have adequate funding to provide students with a quality education. Funding should be sent directly to the classroom for students with particular focus on schools in areas of concentrated poverty. Once elected to the Baltimore City Council, I hope that Kirwan recommendations to increase funding to City Schools will be approved. As councilwoman, I will continue to work with state officials to allocate funding from the state budget to City Schools such that the funding aligns with the Kirwan recommendations. I will also continue to advocate for Baltimore City to increase its contribution to City Schools and ensure there is legislation to maintain adequate funding that takes into account inflation and the future needs of students. As councilwoman, I would also continue to look for creative ways to fund education. Before I support any new businesses or opportunities on behalf of the City, I would continue to consider how we might negotiate additional funding for City Schools. We must be creative in how we consider funding City Schools, and education must be a priority for Baltimore.

#### Academic Achievement

We must have strong academic achievement in our Baltimore City Public Schools. Our students deserve a quality education. We must assess and advance the Baltimore City Public School System curriculum to provide students with a 21st Century education. Students must have a strong core curriculum, as well as opportunities to take honors and advanced placement courses to make our students competitive and marketable for post-secondary education and the workforce.

As councilwoman, I would meet with the CEO of Baltimore City Schools to have a clear understanding regarding City Schools' priorities, goals, and benchmarks for success. I would call for regular hearings on education, which publically review school priorities, goals, and benchmarks. At those hearings, I would invite parents to attend and ask questions regarding student academic achievement. As councilwoman, I will also assess student academic achievement based on the benchmarks and goals set forth by City Schools and hold school officials accountable if City Schools does not achieve those goals and benchmarks.

#### Wraparound Services

As councilwoman, I would advocate for a community schools model in Baltimore City Public Schools, as such model provides students and families with access to wraparound services within the school community, including mental health, afterschool, and social services. A community approach is vital to improving our school system and will take the support of churches, clergy, community groups, and community members all working together to benefit our students. Once elected to the Baltimore City Council, I would work to bring such community stakeholders together to provide support and resources for City Schools.

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 members of the Baltimore City Council should weigh in and give recommendations to the Mayor regarding appointments to the Baltimore City School Board. Currently, a panel of community leaders, organizations, and stakeholders interview all applicants to the Baltimore City School Board and provide recommendations to the Mayor. Members of the Baltimore City Council should have the opportunity to make recommendations to the Mayor or be included in the existing panel.

In identifying members of the school board, we should prioritize choosing individuals with elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary teaching experience and parents of Baltimore City Public School students. Members of the school board must understand and have first-hand knowledge regarding the tools, resources, and instruction necessary to provide students with a quality education.

I would support a school board that includes members with diverse backgrounds, including business, education, arts, and legal experience. As I would prioritize appointments of individuals with teaching experience, I would also commit to supporting a candidate with at least three years of classroom experience. Such knowledge is crucial to providing recommendations and insight to provide students with a quality education.

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 school board with the majority of seats being elected. Elected members of the school board can serve as a voice to the constituency, which encourages the community that their concerns and issues will be heard. A hybrid school board provides a healthy balance of individuals representing constituents, as well as those appointed for a specific skill and expertise they offer to the School Board.



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?

We should consider modifying the current code of conduct to provide students and teachers with support following an incident of violence. We must address the suspended student's behavior, as well as the impact of the student's actions on the teacher or school staff member. The current code should direct the student to meet with a mental health counselor or social worker to address the root cause of the student's violent behavior and ensure a smooth transition back to school. Depending on the severity of the student's violent behavior, it may even be appropriate to move the student to a new classroom or school setting. Finally, the current code must also ensure the staff member has appropriate mental health counseling and support to manage the trauma resulting from a student's violent behavior. Staff should also receive training and support to manage the student's return to school.

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?

If elected to the Baltimore City Council, I would work with residents to identify the needs of the community. Once we identify community needs, I would actively recruit critical nonprofits to occupy space within the vacant schools offering resources and programs for the good of the community. Some nonprofits that might be of interest to the community include those that provide academic enrichment, recreation, arts, college and career readiness, and STEM activities. I would also seek to identify nonprofits and organizations that provide GED and continuing education courses, professional development training, mental health counseling, and parenting classes and training for adults.

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. If elected, I would support the district in completing a comprehensive redistricting plan in coordination with the Baltimore City Planning Department and Baltimore City Public Schools.

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 and staff should receive the benefit of the collective bargaining agreement between the teachers union and the school board.

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

I do not believe there should be a cap on the number of charter schools in Baltimore. I believe we should remain open to educational options that can provide our students with quality education. A cap on charter schools would serve as a bright-line rule leaving little opportunity for flexibility given the needs of students and the school system. As with any school, charter schools should be held accountable for providing students with a quality education and producing strong academic outcomes in students. I do not support any school that is not adequately serving our students.

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 believe that the state government should allocate its funding to invest in its public school system fully. That must be our top priority. I would also consider additional options to provide students with a quality education. While open, I would not support these opportunities at the expense of providing students with a strong public education.

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?

The Kirwan Commission has conducted research and assessed the current state of City Schools. They have considered best practices introduced by education experts from all across the world and have thoroughly reviewed how to provide students with a world-class education. Studies have also been completed demonstrating that the City's contribution to City Schools is insufficient to provide students with a quality education. As such, we should heed to the Kirwan recommendations. Those recommendations would require the City to almost double it's contribution to City Schools. We must look to ways to aid the City in this significant shift in allocating resources to City Schools. However, the need for our students is crucial, real, and requires a sense of urgency.

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

I would propose raising the additional \$300 million to meet Kirwan obligations by looking to regular growths in state revenue. Before we consider taxing residents, we must consider taxing other sources, such as sports gambling and online sales. We should also look to areas of the state budget that can be shifted to support adequately funding education. Finally, we can also look to foundations and philanthropic resources to raise the additional \$300 million.

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. I would support the title change from CEO to Superintendent of public schools to both align with many of the other districts within Maryland, as well as to increase the school system’s focus on academics. Students’ academic achievement must be the priority for our school system.

### 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?

I support public services and do not believe privatization is the answer. I believe we must continue to improve and refine the existing public services we offer in Baltimore instead of outsourcing such service to a private entity. Public service keeps Baltimore residents employed working to provide those services, helps to maintain the cost of the services, and keeps the City accountable for offering such service.

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. I have a vision for development in Baltimore City that assures neighborhoods will contain equitable amounts of low income and affordable housing. We must meet the housing needs of all Baltimore residents. We have a large subset of Baltimore residents that desperately need support in securing housing that is both affordable and meets the needs of their family.

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

Yes. I have a vision for development in Baltimore that will improve the City's financial contribution to the public school system. Through creative arrangements and negotiations with organizations and developers who wish to do business in Baltimore, we must, in return, receive financial support for our school system.

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. I have a vision for development in Baltimore that will employ workers who live in and around the Baltimore region. As we have a significant portion of Baltimore's population that lives in poverty or is unemployed, we must provide employment opportunities for individuals in and around Baltimore. It is also vital that we offer employees a living wage and quality working conditions by following prevailing wage standards and project labor agreements.

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

Yes. I have a vision for Baltimore that will contain businesses that must follow labor peace agreements.

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?

We must continue to provide affordable housing for low-income residents. We must encourage developers to offer affordable housing and support affordable housing development projects for individuals to rent or purchase homes. We must also offer home buying courses, credit counseling, and financial support for first-time homebuyers. While renting is a viable option for housing, it can also be more affordable for individuals to purchase a home if they have the means. We should encourage developers to restore homes in blighted areas of Baltimore. These houses can be purchased, renovated, and sold at low cost to a first-time homebuyer who maintains a modest income. This type of development both support low-income residents but improves the state of Baltimore communities.

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

Improved education and expanded city services play a significant role in my plan to reduce crime in Baltimore. Education is the cornerstone of success. We also have a population of Baltimore residents who lack quality education and consequently struggle to obtain employment. Without education and employment, individuals are more susceptible to living in poverty and engaging in criminal activity.

As Chief of External Affairs to the Office of the State's Attorney for Baltimore, I understand the cycle of poverty that leads individuals to the criminal justice system. I work every day with individuals who struggle with this challenge as I oversee the agency's diversion program, AIM to B'More (AIM). This program provides first-time nonviolent felony offenders with second chance career opportunities. AIM participants often cite that one of the main reasons they began selling drugs or committing other crimes was lack of employment and education. With my oversight, the agency provides AIM participants with personal and professional development, mental health support, and, more importantly, careers.

Whether it is providing a quality, affordable education, job training, or resources, we must consider various ways to provide individuals with an opportunity to thrive. When individuals lack a quality education, they are at a disadvantage, and it becomes more challenging for them to seek employment, earn a quality living, and serve as viable citizens.

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](mailto:treynolds@aftmd.org).