

Torrence - Dist. 7

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

James Torrence

Candidate for:

City Council

Home address

City, ZIP code

Phone

Email address

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Present occupation

Staff Specialist

.....

Employer

Baltimore City Public Schools

.....

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?

As a member of the Baltimore Teachers Union, American Federation of Teachers Local #340, I understand that much of the workplace progress experienced today was willed and created through labor's collective voice and fight for a level playing field. If elected, I would be strong a legislative voice and advocate for improved wages, benefits, working conditions, and employment.

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

Yes. The Baltimore Teachers Union, American Federation of Teachers Local #340, April 2016 - 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?

If elected, I will work to expand collective bargaining rights to municipal employees who currently do not have that right. Librarians and employees of the Baltimore Convention Center deserve a level playing field and city government should not take advantage of its workers.

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?

Yes, I support closing loopholes and ensuring workers have living wages. As a former tipped worker, I know a raise in our tipped worker wages bolster their quality life and supports increasing the city's tax base.

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?

I would not support such a plan because a traditional pension plan yields more pension benefits than a 401(k) plan. Often 401(k) management and investment fees are three times higher. In addition, a 401(K) plan would reduce the employees' actual benefit because the plan assumes risk based on the market.

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, I will never vote to deny retired educators and city employees the benefits that were promised to them.

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?

I agree with a periodic review of workplace environments for city employees. I will work to ensure there are avenues to report unaddressed hazards such as threats of violence and injuries and mechanical malfunctions and poorly maintained equipment. In addition, I would work better educate agencies about adequate working environments.

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?

1. Poor learning environments.

a. I will work to secure funding in capital budget for the maintenance and restoration of our schools. As a Carver Voc-Tech graduate, I personally witnessed school's crumbling infrastructure and struggles to maintain reliable heat. In fact the window and its frames fell on a staff person's car when I attended the school and we advocated for repairs.

2. Underfunded schools.

a. I will work with the City's state delegation to secure funding for the Kirwan Commission Recommendations and work with other councilmembers create ways to pay for the City's contribution requirement.

3. Safety.

a. I will advocate for a mental health-based and restorative approaches to address student conduct and safety issues. We have to address root causes and issues that may make a student misbehave in school.

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 that the City Council should have the power to confirm or deny the mayor's decisions regarding school board members. Boards members public school teaching backgrounds should be at the top of the list. I agree, members should have at least 3 years of experience working in public schools and possess: 1) upstanding integrity and 2) are committed to transparency.

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 board with the majority of the seats being elected. However, the appointed seats should represent different expertise needed on the board and communities within the school district.

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?

I believe all school leaders should be trained in using the code of conduct properly. Too often school leaders do not properly interpret the code of conduct. I will strongly advocate for trauma-informed care and restorative approaches to be a part of addressing underlying issues our students face. However, if an offense warrants a suspension, schools should suspend but have a way to develop safety plans and provide resources to prevent the reoccurrence of the problematic behavior. Our schools received our young people in many states and too often they experience complex issues disrupting their ability to learn.

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 community resources can be used to address needs in various communities. For example, the vacant buildings can be transformed into recreation centers, affordable housing complexes, fine art facilities, urban agriculture education centers and general community resource centers. These new functions would be dependent on community input and need.

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 support school redistricting in Baltimore City to account for population shifts, facility improvements and ensuring resources meet modern needs. I understand that areas of the City may be hostile to redistricting out of the fear that the quality of their neighborhood schools might at risk. However, our schools are broadly underfunded. I believe additional funding for our schools secured through the Kirwan Commission’s recommendations will ensure enough funding can be used to give all students the education they deserve.

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 be considered employees of City Schools’ Board and not the charter school board. These schools are funded differently than traditional schools, and often seek to be removed from function of the district. These schools should be required to adhere to the collective bargaining agreement and have employees protected under BTU.

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

Yes, absolutely. Enrollment in the district has declined. Opening new charter schools would deplete or lower enrollment at traditional 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, these funds could be used to improve the quality of public education. Parents should be able to have the choice to send their children to private schools, but not at the expense of our public schools.

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 City should increase its contribution to City Schools by 15%, from 14% to 29% of its annual operating budget, in order to meet Kirwan obligations. I would love to see the contribution reach 40%.

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

Revenue would have to be shifted from different budget allocations to meet this commitment. Namely, a review all expenditures would have occur to determine if operations can be streamlined and/or funded through other means. We have to identify wasteful spending. In addition, we should look at ways City Schools could generate revenue via the health suites and 3rd party billing for services.

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?

If elected, I would support returning the title of the head of our system to “Superintendent”, rather than “CEO”. A district leader should be an educator first and find staff to do the operations. And functions of the district. City Schools is not a corporate entity.

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 strongly disagree privatizing public services or property. Public services and property should remain accountable to the public and not a private company's shareholders or board.

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?

If elected, I will fight to ensure that developers willing to build low-income/affordable housing projects have access to the necessary resources and government support. These projects should be distributed to areas where it is needed the most while, at the same time, avoiding high concentration of low-income housing projects.

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

If elected, I will support incentivizing developers to build community resource centers for students and families in and around Baltimore in order improve public safety in our neighborhoods and foster innovation in our schools.

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

If elected, I will fight to ensure that developers follow prevailing wage standards and PLAs in order to create and sustain good, well-paying jobs, for working-class Baltimoreans.

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

If elected, I would support PLAs that improve the quality of the workforce and create a training path for residents to obtain careers to adequately support themselves and their families. Baltimore should use the District of Columbia PLA approach as a starting point for examining our practices and use of PLAs.

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?

If elected, I will work with the City delegation and local developers to push through affordable housing projects across the city. I will fight to make sure such developments are done so that they are best able to address the needs of Baltimore City residents, including heavily subsidized housing for current students and the continuation of property tax credits for low-income city employees.

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 crucial roles in my plan to reduce crime in Baltimore City. I fully support of reallocating funds within the City's budget to increase spending on schools, substance abuse and mental health, affordable housing, and other investment critical to community safety. If elected, my top priority is ensuring our schools have the resources and personnel to aide our students to development and success. I firmly believe we must offer our students a holistic education, providing them with a foundation that will allow them to excel academically, socially, and professionally, and in turn prevent them from engaging in criminal or dangerous activities. The City must address the front-end root causes of our issues. Policing is essential to address issues immediately. However, front-end investments have been proven to lower violent crime.

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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