

Lenora Gutzone - 13 - House

AFT-Maryland Candidate Questionnaire for the 2022 Election

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, as well as state employee members of the Maryland Professional Employees Council, AFT Healthcare-Maryland, and the Maryland Classified Employees Association. Together, with the Baltimore County Federation of Public Employees, and Baltimore County Federation of Public Health Nurses, AFT-Maryland has thousands of members who work to make the state a better place for its residents.

The AFT-Maryland has prepared the following questionnaire for candidates running to represent us in Annapolis 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 Maryland and DC AFL-CIO State Federation; the state federation will announce its final endorsements in early 2022. However, because we are a large contingency within the Maryland 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 7th, 2022, 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.



Candidate Information

Please note the AFT-Maryland plans to make these questionnaires public. However, personal information will be redacted.

Employer

self

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

General Questions

1. The AFT-Maryland is a federation of numerous employee unions, including Baltimore City teachers and paraprofessional and school-related personnel (BTU); professional state workers (MPEC—Maryland Professional Employees Council), state healthcare professionals (AFT Healthcare-Maryland), state classified employees (MCEA—Maryland Classified Employees Association); as well county (BCFPE and BCFPHN) and city (CUB) employees. Why should we support your campaign?

Education is in my bones. I come from a long line of educators - my great-grandfather, grandfather, both my parents and a sibling have all been teachers. My dad rose through the school system I grew up in to become the Assistant Superintendent. I believe the public school system and its employees is one of our most important institutions. As a Delegate, I will always support education to the absolute best of my ability.

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. Expanding the right to collective bargaining. Currently, a number of state and public school employees in Maryland have collective bargaining. However, many still do not. For example, state judiciary branch workers; grad students, adjuncts, and full-time faculty in the University of Maryland System; faculty at our state's community colleges; coordinators in community schools; and many county and city librarians; do not have the right to bargain collectively. If elected, will you sponsor and/or support legislation to grant these public employees the right to engage in collective bargaining with their employer?

I am fully predisposed to supporting collective bargaining. My support of any specific piece of legislation will always be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

4. Raising the minimum wage. Our members see every day the harmful impact of a minimum wage that does not keep up with rising costs of living throughout the region. While Maryland will raise its minimum wage to \$15 per hour in 2025, it still will not be indexed to inflation, and Marylanders working at this compensation level will continue to fall behind. If elected to office, will you author and/or support legislation to tie the minimum wage to the rate of inflation?

I am in favor of raising the minimum wage. The current minimum wage is simply not sufficient. At the same time, I know this is a complex issue. As an example, workers providing critical services, such as Direct Support Professionals in the developmental disability community, are paid based on reimbursement rates defined by the state. If those rates are not able to keep up with changes to the minimum wage, a whole (vulnerable) segment of our population will be at risk of not being able to access the support they need and are eligible for. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

5. Binding arbitration in contract negotiations.

Maryland recognizes the importance of collective bargaining as a way to assure employees at the state, municipal, and school district level have a fair and democratic voice in the conditions that govern their employment. For many of those employees and their unions, when disagreements arise during negotiations, there is no mechanism by which those disputes can be resolved. In most cases when the parties reach an impasse, management can implement their proposals without the consent of the employees. Because of this, management often realizes there is no need to bargain in good faith. To fix this flaw, many states and local governments have implemented binding arbitration. When an impasse arises at the bargaining table, management and the union agree to take their case to an objective, third party arbitrator. The arbitrator hears the case, and issues a ruling that both management and the employees must agree to. There is some form of binding arbitration for state employees in Connecticut, Delaware, and Maine, and Baltimore County offers binding arbitration for its municipal employees, for example.

Do you support objective, binding arbitration for contract negotiations for school district, city, county, and state employees? As an elected official, would you support strengthening those rights for the public employees that fall under your jurisdiction?

Yes, I support objective, binding arbitration as a method of ensuring both parties negotiate and act in good faith within a Collective Bargaining Agreement.

6. Public employee compensation. Under the current governor's administration, it is rare for state workers to get the compensation they deserve, even though the state has often had a budget surplus. As a result, too many public agencies have staffing problems, as many employees leave for better compensation in the private sector. What is your plan to assure state, county, and municipal employees (including workers employed at BCCC, the Maryland School for the Deaf, and all public, state-supported higher education institutions throughout the state) that their compensation levels will be financially competitive with the private sector?

This is a complex and multifaceted issue. I believe that state employees have not been supported in this area by the current administration. I certainly support workers getting the compensation they deserve. I will be open to and look for opportunities to partner with others in order to improve compensation for state and local employees; support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

7. Health insurance transparency. Audits and budget analysis show some government healthcare surplus funds are being diverted for use in unrelated areas. In effect, employees are therefore paying much higher than their negotiated healthcare splits for employer self-insured healthcare coverage. What should a public body (the state, the municipality, or the local school system) do with money refunded to employees' health insurance programs? As an elected official, will you sponsor legislation that would force government employers with self-funded insurance programs to be more transparent with actual claim cost, rebates and other refund programs?

While I do not have in depth knowledge about this issue, my instinct would be that the funds should be directed back into the insurance pool with the expectation that the savings would be reflected in reduced premiums for the employees. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

8. Retirement for public employees: defined benefit versus defined contribution. Most Maryland public employees have defined benefit retirement plans like a pension. This allows employees to plan for their retirement because they know exactly how much income they will be receiving. With defined contribution retirement plans like a 401(k), employees contemplating retirement are never quite sure when the right time is to retire because of changes in their plan's investments. Do you support keeping public employee retirement plans as defined benefit/pension plans?

My experience as a federal employee is with a hybrid system - with both a defined benefit component (not as robust as the old federal Civil Servants Retirement System) and a deferred contribution plan (the Thrift Savings Plan). Having always known that it was a hybrid system, I knew that I had an active role in building my retirement portfolio and I was conscientious about contributing to my TSP account (there is a government match component to it as well) so would support an 'opt-out' approach to employee contributions. Because of my experience, I don't think this is an either/or issue, and I think it is an area where research into best practices and some creative thinking are needed. And, if changes are made, there needs to be comprehensive and focused employee education and training on the modified system.

9. Prescription drugs for retired state employees. The State of Maryland is currently being sued by a group of retired state employees over the loss of their prescription drug coverage. Their position is the state has backed out of the promised retiree prescription drug benefit. Do you support full health benefits for retirees including prescription drug benefits? Under what circumstances, if any, would you agree to a reduction in benefits for retirees?

The cost of prescription drugs is an issue for many people in Maryland and beyond, and needs to be addressed as such. Given that it is an issue for more than just retired state employees, I cannot specifically delineate under what circumstances I might agree to a reduction in benefits (meaning if there is a broader plan to address prescription drug costs, it might make sense to modify a benefit that is being covered through an alternate method).

10. Appropriate staffing levels. This past fall, numerous news reports confirmed what many state employees have already known: that staffing in a number of state agencies have fallen to levels that the safety of workers and the ability to carry out their duties has been compromised. For example, the Maryland Department of Health has not been able to admit court-ordered patients to state mental health facilities in accordance with the law due to the lack of staff. Likewise, the State Investment Park Commission found that park ranger staffing levels are too low to meet the demand of Maryland Residents wanting to visit our state's parks. The most recent state analysis shows nearly every state agency has at least a 10% vacancy rate, with some of the larger agencies having a vacancy rate over 15%! Would you support efforts to increase recruitment and retention of qualified state, county and city employees? Would you make funding of additional staff a priority?

Yes I would support recruitment and retention efforts and I would support efforts to find the funding necessary for additional staff. I would hope that thoughtful decisions on how to use federal, pandemic related funds currently available (or becoming available) to the state could be used for some of these effort and/or more funding for these efforts maybe available because pandemic monies get used for projects that would otherwise have to have been paid for by the state. I believe it is important for the state to invest in the people it employs to carry out state programs and processes that support the citizens of Maryland.

Public Education in Baltimore City

11. General [for candidates running for Governor, Comptroller, or for office in Baltimore City legislative districts only]: What do you think are the three biggest problems facing Baltimore City public schools? If elected, how will you solve these problems?

12. Education funding. The state has enacted the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, an ambitious plan developed by bipartisan education experts and stakeholders. The Blueprint will provide a world-class education our students need. Despite hand-wringing from the current governor, the state has the funding to pay for the Blueprint through Fiscal Year 2026. Beginning in FY 2027, the state will have to make decisions regarding revenues to continue to provide every student in the state the education they need. If elected, how would you propose the state fund the Blueprint? How will you advocate for these necessary revenues?

Because FY27 is still several years off, we are still in the midst of a global pandemic with un-knowable long term consequences, have no data on the effectiveness on the Blueprint, and cannot know what the fiscal status of the State will be, it is hard to envision what the necessary revenues may be. It is similarly challenging to envision what funding avenues may be available. However, I will always work to ensure that education receives needed funding.

13. Living Wage for Paraprofessionals. One element that was unfortunately unresolved by the Kirwan Commission recommendations was the pay for Paraprofessionals and School Related Personnel (PSRPs). For too many PSRPs throughout the state, their compensation levels are not enough to be considered a living wage. Will PSRP compensation be a high priority for you if you are elected to office? How can the state better show its appreciation to PSRPs working in our state's public schools?

Living wages for all workers is important. PSRPs are critical to the success of the school system and are often a significant source of support and security for students; they deserve a living wage. Input from PSRPs, awareness of best practices, and creative thinking around compensation and enhanced benefits - including possibly free continuing education/tuition for college level courses and other similar supports - should be considered.

14. Public School Construction and Renovation [for candidates running for Governor, Comptroller, or for office in Baltimore City legislative districts only]. In 2013, the state passed the 21st Century Schools Program, which allowed the Baltimore Public School System and the Maryland Stadium Authority to leverage bonds to renovate roughly 25 public school buildings. While a good start, Baltimore city still has the largest portfolio of aging and obsolete school buildings in the state; therefore, the program needs to be expanded. If elected, what will your administration do to assure more aging school buildings in Baltimore city will be eligible for renovations?

15. Public charter schools and local oversight. There are over 50 public charter schools in the state of Maryland, and the vast majority of them reside in Baltimore city. Private, out-of-state charter school operators have previously wished to weaken the state law overseeing charter schools to make teachers and staff employees of the charter board rather than employees of the local school district. This would remove all protections that teachers and staff have under their collective bargaining agreements. It would limit oversight of these privately run public charter schools by taking them out from under the purview of the local school boards. It would also give the private operators a “blank check waiver” from any local school board policy. Should charter school teachers and staff be considered employees of the charter school or of the local school board? Should oversight of these schools be weakened?

I do not believe that oversight of these schools should be weakened. Across the board, when a government entity contracts out, using tax-payer dollars, critical efforts such as the education of our future workforce, oversight of those contracts is vital to ensuring all objectives of the effort are being met.

16. School vouchers and the BOOST program. Maryland is a state that diverts public funding to send students to private schools - the BOOST school voucher program. While the program is not codified in law, the governor's budget every year has re-directed millions of dollars of public funds to these private schools, many of which discriminate against students and families who don't adhere to that school's beliefs such as gay marriage. If elected to office, what will be your plan regarding Maryland's BOOST school voucher program? Should the state ever give public dollars to students to attend a private school? Would you support tax breaks to corporations that fund student scholarships for private k-12 schools?

The issue of public funding for students attending private schools is complex. As a person who has been active in the disabilities rights arena, I can see where this option for children who are non-neuro-typical learners is reasonable and appropriate. At the same time, I also believe that adhering to the anti-discrimination regulations that apply to public schools is critical. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

17. School Staffing. In too many of our public schools, administrators are not following the law and are hiring people who are employees of non-profit organizations, some of whom are uncredentialed and untrained. Because they are not direct hires of the school district, they are not covered by the collective bargaining contract, nor are they held to the same accountability standards as certificated employees. If elected, will you work to ensure that school districts follow the law to prevent public schools from hiring employees from nonprofit organizations, circumventing the collective bargaining agreement? Under any circumstances is it acceptable to you for a school to hire an uncredentialed and non-unionized employee to be involved in the education of Maryland students?

This is an issue I do not have much knowledge about. However, following the law is important and the integrity of both sides to a collective bargaining agreement is core to its success. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

18. Teacher recruitment and retention. The global pandemic has exacerbated the increasingly challenging problem of teacher retention and recruitment. Far too often, experienced, successful educators are made to leave our school systems. Newly hired teachers in some alternative teacher education programs stay in the classroom for an average of 3 years. How can the state enact legislation to support the retention of the highest quality educators, and recruit more to their ranks?

I believe that all teachers - new and seasoned - deserve to feel supported by their leaders - from the principal to local leaders to state leaders. Obviously salary levels are important to both recruitment and retention, but they are not everything. More time for planning, training and mentoring is important. Good, supportive leadership at all levels is important - staff needs to know that leadership have their interests in mind! And communications and transparency are important factors as well. Legislation in this area must be thoughtful, inclusive of best practices, and creative. I also think it is especially important in this space to consider unintended consequences. Teachers already have enormous level of administrative burden so any legislation should be considered through that lens as well. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

19. Elected versus an appointed school board [for candidates running for Governor, Comptroller, or for office in Baltimore City legislative districts only]. In 2022, the citizens of Baltimore city will finally be allowed to elect 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?

20. Standardized testing in the schools. In our state's public school system, instruction time in our classrooms is often pushed aside so that students may prepare for and take a plethora of standardized tests. What is your view on standardized testing in our state's public schools? If elected, what policy positions would you take regarding the number of standardized tests required of our students?

This is a large and complex issue. I do believe that there are too many standardized tests and that too often teachers feel required to teach to the test. Tests are also only a snap shot of what a student can do on one particular day in one particular format and are not good at recognizing many of the strengths that will be needed in the work world students will be entering (like teamwork, collaboration, leadership, etc) I also believe that often we have lost the 'why' behind testing. Should it be so that we can compare one school (or teacher) against another? or should tests be a tool for teachers to learn more about their students, so they can be a better teacher for each and every student? My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

Vision for Maryland

21. Transportation. When Governor Hogan cancelled the Red Line rail project, he replaced it with a revision of the MTA regional bus lines and renamed the system the Baltimore Link. How effective do you believe this new bus plan has been? How can the state improve the transportation needs of its residents?

Based on a Baltimore Sun article (9/20/20) the Baltimore Link system has negatively impacted bus riders in Baltimore - even before the pandemic highlighted its challenges. Specifically, the article notes that "a transit passenger could only get to 11% of the regional jobs within an hour in 2014 yet by 2018, after Baltimore Link, they could reach only 9% within an hour." This inefficiency affects all levels of riders including Baltimore area school students who use the system to get back and forth to school each day and their parents who rely on buses to not only get to work but also to things like parent-teacher conferences and after school events, even groceries. Investments must be made - including if at all possible returning to the Red Line - in a system that creates and sustains jobs, improves neighborhoods and provides reliable transportation for all Baltimore residents

22. Revenues and closing unfair tax loopholes. In order for the state, county, city, and local school system to continue to provide the services to Maryland residents that they deserve, do you believe the state must work to close loopholes in our tax structure? From things like instituting combined reporting (where out-of-state corporations no longer avoid paying taxes on the revenues they generate in Maryland) or a carried interest tax (where wealthy hedge fund managers pay the same income rate that the rest of Maryland residents pay), would you introduce and/or support legislation that would make our state tax code more fair?

I believe our tax code needs to be more fair and more transparent. We need to look for opportunities to recognize and close loopholes and to make it less regressive. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

23. Privatization, General. As public employees, each of our members works for an entity that is directly accountable to the residents we serve. Far too often, when jurisdictions and school districts choose to contract out or privatize those services, the level of accountability changes with those services. A private company or nonprofit is accountable to its board of directors or shareholders, and not necessarily to the residents that rely on its services. In addition, their employees are seldom unionized. If elected, would you support any plans to privatize and/or farm out work to a private company or nonprofit in our state and local governments or local school systems? If so, why?

As a former civil servant employee at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, for over 30 years I was directly responsible to the American tax-payer. During that time we have services that (for a variety of reasons) were contracted out. Some of this can be seen as good public policy. As an example, at Goddard custodial and grounds management was contracted to Melwood Services. This provided good, full time jobs to people with developmental disabilities, a constituency that often has a difficult time finding meaningful employment. However, that is not true of all contracted efforts and I firmly believe that making the decision to contract out work must be done thoughtfully and with consideration for factors including employee representation, safety and security, recruitment and retention and employer-provided benefits such as health insurance and paid leave (including family leave). It is not always appropriate to make these decisions simply based on fiscal considerations.

24. Privatization, specific. On September 2, 2021, the Maryland Department of Health announced the Facilities Master Plan, which includes plans to close Western Maryland Hospital Center in Hagerstown and Deer's Head Hospital in Salisbury within the next 5 years by transferring patients to private facilities. In many cases, these facilities offer the only long-term care options for Maryland residents on dialysis or who are dealing with chronic respiratory problems. If elected, would you support the plan to close these state facilities? Would you support outsourcing state, county or city operations?

I would need a deeper level of understanding on the pros and cons of these decisions, the plans to ensure services remain available in these areas and the long term plans for the closed facilities. My support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

25. State's mental health and addiction crisis. The need for mental health and addiction services has increased during the pandemic. Mental health beds in the state hospital system are filled with court ordered patients. If elected, would you support increasing private and public resources for treatment to be sure all Maryland residents have access to the care they need?

The pandemic has exposed the crisis in mental health services with in the State (and nationwide). I support efforts to increase access to mental health resources; support for any specific piece of legislation will be contingent upon the parameters and language within the bill.

26. Vaccines and working with unions to return to work. The COVID-19 pandemic has of course been a challenge for the safety of Maryland residents and our members who have been returning to work. While we hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we know from past experiences with mutations of this novel virus, recovery and a return to normalcy may not be linear. Vaccines must be a part of a comprehensive strategy to get past the pandemic, as well as an important tool for fighting public health threats in the future. What role do you believe unions and management have in constructing a plan to vaccinate their workforce? What in your mind is the way unions and management can work together to make sure represented employees are offered a COVID-19 vaccine?

I think at this point in the pandemic, the unvaccinated are in one of two groups - those who would like to get vaccinated but are still struggling to find a time/place to get a shot (or a second or a booster). For those folks we need to continue to broadly advertise the benefits and availability of shots. For those who are opposed to vaccines the task is much harder and we must start with "meeting them where they are" which, to me, means reaching out, accepting their concerns, their disbelief of the risk, or even of the existence of the virus itself. It also means not trying to shame them, make them feel stupid or tell them that they are wrong. It means taking time with them, answering their questions, discussing their concerns the appropriate person (or entity) to do that will vary. This is hard work and will not always be successful. It also means that it is critical for unions and management to work in tandem and with a common approach to try to get as many shots in arms as possible. There are lots of ways unions and management can work together on this: Larger employers should endeavor to bring vaccinations to the work site -with both union and senior management on-site during events (and include availability for family members to get shots if possible); workers should be given time off to get vaccinated (this is a good investment by the company - both economically and from an employee welfare and retention point of view); joint communications from union and company management should be frequent and clear; every communication (including those not specific to Covid) should include mention of the importance of vaccines; printed advertisements (posters and flyers) about vaccination should have union and company insignia/logos on them; videos and zoom (or even in-person!) meetings should have representation from both sides on the stage and speaking. These are just some of the ways that unions and management can show employees that they are on the same page about the importance of everyone getting vaccinated.

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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