

Palakovich Carr - 17 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

Maryland General Assembly

Party affiliation

Democrat

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

It's early enough in this cycle that no endorsements have been announced in my race yet. However, in the 2018 primary, I earned the endorsements of Montgomery County Education Association, MCPS Retirees Association, Maryland State and DC AFL-CIO, among others.

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

Elected State Delegate for District 17 in 2018 and Rockville City Councilmember in 2013 and 2015

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?

I got into politics because I believe that government should work for the people and that elected officials should most help the people who need the most help, as they often have the least voice in politics. My top issues as a legislator are fixing our tax code through progressive policy changes, addressing economic insecurity, and pro-democracy election reforms.

I'm the 12th most productive Delegate this term in regard to the number of bills I sponsored that passed the General Assembly. Fourteen of my bills are now law, including a law to aim for no deaths due to roadway crashes, to ban toxic chemicals from beauty products, and to create a whistleblower program for tax fraud.

Prior to serving in the House of Delegates, I served two terms in local government. I'm a scientist by training and the proud mom of a first grader in a Montgomery County public school.

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

No, as I have not worked in a profession that has union representation.

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?

Yes. I am supportive of the state taking action to protect workers' right to unionize and to collectively bargain. In the 2021 session, I voted for HB 13, which prohibits the state or local governments from using public funds to influence worker unionization efforts; for SB 9, regarding University of Maryland employees; and for HB 894, to provide collective bargaining rights for community college employees. I also support legislation to provide an income tax subtraction for union dues. I look forward to voting for future bills on this issue.

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?

Yes. I voted for the minimum wage bill in 2019, but was disappointed that it wasn't a stronger bill. I hope that the General Assembly will revisit this issue and strengthen the law by including more professions, such as tipped workers, as well as indexing the minimum wage so that it continues to increase over time. People's expenses increase over time—so should their wages.

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?

I'm open to this and would like to learn more about this issue before taking a position.

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?

As the daughter of two retired state employees, I know that government salaries are not as competitive as they need to be to attract and retain workers. The state's current budget surplus and projected increases in revenues in future years are a good opportunity to revisit this topic and to increase government workers' salaries.

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?

Surplus healthcare funds should be reinvested towards the next year's healthcare costs in order to decrease or at least stabilize the future cost of employee premiums. I would support state legislation to achieve this goal and to make costs more transparent for employees and their representative unions.

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?

Yes

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?

I voted for the 2019 legislation (SB 946) to provide prescription drug reimbursement or catastrophic coverage to retired state employees. I do not believe that the state should make further reductions to coverage.

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?

The current vacancy levels are unacceptable. The Governor and his agency leadership should be treating the filling of vacant positions as a top priority, including increasing employee salaries. The State can't provide good services to Marylanders without government employees to do this critical work.

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?

N/a

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?

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future is a major leap forward for our public school students and educators. I was proud to vote for the bill and the veto override, as well as the 2021 bill to make revisions to the Blueprint because of the pandemic. I truly believe that these laws will substantially improve the education of students across the state.

Additional revenue is definitely needed to continue implementation of the Blueprint. The funding sources passed in 2020 were only a down payment. We need to pass significant additional revenue sources to pay for the out years.

With the state's current budget surplus, there is an opportunity to transfer a lump sum of money from the General Fund into the Blueprint Fund. That won't be a permanent funding fix, but it will buy us some additional years of implementation of the Blueprint. To fully fund the Blueprint for the long-term, we need to enact new revenue raisers, such as combined reporting, ending the throwback rule, closing other corporate tax loopholes, and increasing taxes on the wealthiest individuals. I have been active with the Fair Funding Coalition on these efforts, including sponsoring several bills the past two sessions.

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?

I agree that salaries are not high enough to provide a living wage for certain school personnel. That's why I co-sponsored Del. Ebersole's bill in 2019 to require that districts pay all of their employees a living wage. Unfortunately that bill did not advance.

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?

N/a

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 believe that charter school employees should be employees of the local school district, with all of the current employee protections and district oversight of these schools.

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?

A strong public school system is of vital importance to Maryland's future. Research is clear that states that invest in K-12 education reap the rewards of a stronger economy, as well as better outcomes for individual students before and after graduation. Maryland must invest in our public education system as is envisioned in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. To that end, we should reduce taxpayer support of private schools and I have consistently voted to reduce BOOST funding.

In regard to corporate tax breaks, corporations that provide scholarships to private schools are likely already getting a tax break so long as the school is a 501(c)(3). Eliminating this specific tax break may prove to be difficult administratively to eliminate, but I'd be happy to discuss further about a viable strategy.

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?

No one is above the law. All schools should be complying with state and local hiring laws and if they aren't, then enforcement actions need to be taken and strengthening of the law may be required. Although this is the first I'm hearing of this issue, it just sounds wrong and action should be taken to fix it.

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?

First and foremost, if AFT-Maryland has particular policies that you will be advocating for in future sessions to address teacher recruitment and/or retention, I will support those efforts in my capacity as a member of the Education Subcommittee.

On the recruitment front, I'd like to see more discussion about providing financial supports for students who pursue an education degree or certification. For instance, the State could pay student teachers for their work during in-class student teaching. I've heard from college education programs that this is a barrier for college students, as many students give up paid jobs in order to do their student teaching. Similarly, the fees associated with the standardized testing that education majors must take to become teachers can also be a financial barrier for some.

Another idea would be for public colleges to charge less for tuition for education majors. Some public universities in other states have tuitions that vary by major. Maryland's public universities could charge less for tuition for education majors as a way to attract more students into these majors. Additionally, the State could cover the costs for educators to get certified in high-demand fields, such as ESOL.

The Teacher Academy of Maryland seems like it could be a promising pipeline of potential education majors, but many high school students who participate don't go on to major in education in college. We should figure out why these students are not continuing in the education field.

In addition to the overall shortage of teachers, it's well documented there are specific disciplines that are especially lacking educators. My own background is in science and I've personally experienced how leaky the STEM pipeline is. (I left science after finishing my Master's degree in biology.) Personally, I've known many scientist graduates who are interested in teaching, but there isn't a clear pathway to make the transition short of going back to graduate school for an education degree. I'm not sure what the exact solution is, but would like to see the University of Maryland System or another institution of higher education in Maryland explore how to attract STEM undergraduate and graduate students, as well as working STEM professionals, who are passionate about science into careers in science education.

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?

N/a

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?

I believe that standardized tests serve a needed purpose in terms of objectively measuring student progress, but too much testing detracts from instructional time. Although I don't have a depth of knowledge on this issue, I believe and trust educators when they say that there is too much testing happening. I look forward to hearing recommendations from education professionals about needed reforms.

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?

I'm not familiar with the details of the current bus lines, but I do think it was a mistake when the Governor canceled the Red Line.

It's clear that the state needs additional dedicated funding for public transit, including the Red Line in Baltimore, and elsewhere. The passage of the federal infrastructure package is a fantastic opportunity for our state to fund these projects.

I'm an active member of the Transit Caucus and sponsored legislation in 2020 and 2021 to expand commuter bus service into northern Virginia.

For this session, I'm organizing a legislative package of pedestrian and bicyclist safety bills. (More than 70% of transit riders walk or bike to their station, so this issue goes hand in hand with transit funding.) I'll be sponsoring a bill to require State Highway Administration to investigate every traffic fatality involving a pedestrian or bicyclist and to publicly release recommendations for how to improve street safety in that area. Both of these efforts are followups to the 2019 law I sponsored to create Maryland's Vision Zero program—a data-driven approach to improving roadway safety for all users with the goal of having no deaths or serious injuries on our roads by 2030.

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?

Our state tax code is upside down: the richest 1 percent pay a smaller share of their income in state and local taxes than other Marylanders. This means that Maryland taxpayers making \$534,000 or more a year pay the lowest tax rate. Moreover, wealthy corporations are adept at using tax loopholes to minimize or even eliminate their tax liability; for instance, 91 major companies—including Amazon, Chevron, and IBM—paid \$0 in federal taxes in 2018. Changes are needed to our state tax code so that wealthy corporations and individuals pay their fair share in taxes.

As a member of the Fair Funding Coalition, I know that the AFT-Maryland is familiar with the package of proposed fixes to the state's tax system. I've been proud to work with Coalition members to push for progressive revenue raisers and support all of the bills supported by the Coalition. I have sponsored several of these bills to close corporate tax loopholes and to make our tax system fairer. Among my bills that have become law include creating a whistleblower program to catch tax cheats, reforms to the opportunity zone tax credits, automatic decoupling from future federal tax changes that will be expensive to the state, and a public database of state economic development incentives.

I have also sponsored bills to tax capital gains and carried interest at higher rates, close the LLC loophole, end ineffective business subsidies, decouple from the federal tax deductions for opportunity zone investors, and allow counties to increase property taxes on mansions.

For the 2022 session, I am bringing back a bill to reform Enterprise Zone Tax Credits. I plan to reintroduce the other bills in future sessions.

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?

I oppose efforts to privatize public education services and jobs. Expansions of services, such as the push for additional school counselors that has been considered by the legislature in recent years, should be accomplished through the hiring of staff by school districts.

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 don't support the proposed privatization of these health care facilities nor do I believe that the state should be outsourcing other core services.

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?

Yes. Many youth and adults have struggled with mental health during the pandemic and we need to ensure that their needs are being met.

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?

Vaccinations and booster are key to preventing further spread of COVID. All eligible Marylanders should get vaccinated and boosted and employers and unions should encourage employees to get vaccinated or submit to routine testing.

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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