

Cusack, House, 44B

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 May 12th, 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

Comcast

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?

My passions and my main purpose is to be a beacon for the marginalized and Working-Class People of Maryland. I will implement proven and proactive solutions to stop our current regressive reactionary politics and build a solid foundation of infrastructure to future-proof our wonderful state. My platform is designed to have an immediate societal change to improve the quality of life for everyone.

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

I have never been a member of a union; however, I have always supported organizing, unionizing, and striking for better workers' rights. I also have a strong moral conviction to never cross a picket line.

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?

The crux of my running for office is worker's rights. I am a strong advocate for workplace democracy and collective bargaining. We need to pass legislation that allows all public workers to have a union. It's paramount for everyone, public or private, to have the right to form a union and negotiate a contract. If elected, I will be a thorn in the side of anyone against the rights of workers.

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 support raising the minimum wage to at least \$20 per hour. Currently in the state of Maryland it would take a minimum hourly wage of \$28.20 to afford a two bedroom apartment. It is absolutely unacceptable that our minimum wage is still \$12.50 per hour. We must increase the minimum wage and make sure we future-proof legislation to continually increase minimum wage to keep up with cost of living.

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?

Arbitration is necessary to keep employers bargaining in good faith. And we need to work to strengthen union and employee bargaining power, since the scales are tipped heavily in the favor of the employer.

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?

Every child in Maryland has the right to an education. My approach to increase funding for schools is using the budget surplus, covid relief funds, and tax revenue to pass a comprehensive infrastructure package. Renovate aging schools to update them to a 21st century standard. This will be an important part of any infrastructure projects I support.

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?

I support a federal single payer health care system. Not only because I feel you should not profit on someone's health and well-being, but also because it strengthens a union's ability to bargain by removing healthcare being tied to the Employer. Not many states have the available resources to provide full healthcare to their citizens. We must pressure our federal representatives to support this. In the interim of our federal government catching up to the rest of the industrialized world, I will support any legislation that makes quality health care cheaper, better, and more transparent for all Marylanders.

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?

While I support a 401k over a defined pension plan in the private sector, mostly due to the rise of vulture capitalism stealing those funds from employees, I do not support the move for public employees. Maryland's state pension fund should not be used as a rainy day slush fund to throw around to special interests, and we must propose and pass legislation that protects the funds for future generations of Maryland workers. As the State of Maryland we are a great authority and have the power to negotiate with fiduciary interest in good faith for our worker's pension plans. We need to move away from using private hedge fund managers to hiring our own managers to protect our worker's pensions from bad faith actors.

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 believe everyone should have free access to the prescription drugs that they need to be healthy and alive. While we pressure our federal government to move to a single payer healthcare system, I would support full health benefits for retirees and will never support removing or reducing benefits for retirees or any other person covered under social safety nets.

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?

We must fund and staff facilities that make life better for all Marylanders. It is crucial to have as many options available to the people in need of these services. Funding for state services and facilities would absolutely be a priority for me.

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?

Every child in Maryland has the right to an education. My approach to increase funding for schools is using the budget surplus, covid relief funds, and tax revenue to pass a comprehensive infrastructure package. We must renovate aging schools to update them to a 21st century standard. This will be an important part of any infrastructure projects I support.

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?

Institute millionaire's tax of at least 6.25%, propose legislation that limits the amount of deductions upper income residents can claim. Reworking and raising the sales tax making necessary items such as food, clothing, and prescription/over-the-counter drugs exempt from said sales tax. Legalizing and taxing recreational marijuana, using the budget surplus, covid relief funds, and new tax revenue.

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?

PSRPs are vital to the inner workings of a school. While teaching is an important, undervalued occupation, PSRPs are overlooked as the ones who keep the school running outside of the classrooms. We must increase PSRP wages and benefits to make students' school life as welcoming, and as easy, as possible.

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?

Every child in Maryland has the right to an education. My approach to increase funding for schools is using the budget surplus, covid relief funds, and tax revenue to pass a comprehensive infrastructure package. We must renovate aging schools to update them to a 21st century standard. This will be an important part of any infrastructure projects I support.

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?

Charter schools should not be members of the local school board or have any influence in deciding the criteria of education for public schools. Oversight for charter schools should be strengthened, and never weakened, to make sure the students that go to these schools get the best possible experience and education in a safe environment.

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?

I am against school voucher programs. Public funding for schools should go only to public schools. I do not support tax breaks for corporations to send their executive's children to private schools.

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?

I stand up for and support the unions representing the public employees of Maryland. I will propose and/or support legislation that strengthens collective bargaining and prevents schools from hiring outside of the union. There are no circumstances where a non-union public employee should be involved in the education of our students.

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?

We must fund and staff facilities that make life better for all Marylanders. It is crucial to have as many options available to the people in need of these services. Funding for state services and facilities would absolutely be a priority for me.

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?

I believe little in parent's rights to the education of their child, as it usually inhibits the child's right to quality education. In this vein, I believe public education union employees should be appointing the school board, and school boards should not be an elected position for constituents.

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?

Standardized testing is terrible at representing a student's education level and is better at showing demographic disparity. I oppose standardized testing, and would confer to public education experts and current education union members to find out the best way to move past standardized testing.

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?

Maryland had a \$2.5 billion surplus in the state budget in 2021. We have the funds to improve transportation infrastructure. I do not support the privatization of public transportation. Larry Hogan's cancellation and rerouting of funds of Red Line was suspicious, at best. Maryland is the 11th highest state in public transit usage, but ranks 44th in public transportation. This needs to be rectified immediately.

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?

Institute millionaire's tax of at least 6.25%, propose legislation that limits the amount of deductions upper income residents can claim. Reworking and raising the sales tax making necessary items such as food, clothing, and prescription/over-the-counter drugs exempt from said sales tax. Legalizing and taxing recreational marijuana will also bring in extra revenue.

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?

We must protect and increase union representation, and I do not support the privatization of public services.

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?

Mental health hospitals and rehabilitation centers and other social services are more necessary than prisons or jails and we can easily adjust prison and police budgets, if necessary, to allocate funds to these necessary facilities. I am fervently against closing mental health centers, and other state funded social services. I would pressure and propose/support legislation to keep facilities running smoothly and staffed properly. I do not support the privatization of public 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?

I support increasing mental health care for all Marylanders, and this includes funding for the resources needed to get the best care necessary.

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?

One of the most effective approaches is to first ask open ended questions and listen to people about their hesitancy towards the vaccine. Its very important to acknowledged their concerns and to provide informative solutions. Unions and management must dispel misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines with easy to reference and uncluttered objective truths back by empirical data. I strongly recommend to use positive current events on mRNA vaccine technology. The technology is a progression from DNA vaccines meaning more effective and safer, bring up the mRNA recent trial breakthroughs for HIV, types of cancer, and Alzheimer's.

Also, have to address side effects and put into context, meaning using relatable analogies. Then conclude with positive position testimonials and personal stories to appeal others to get vaccinated. We want our workers to have the highest quality of life and the safest workplaces.

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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