

Democratic Club (LDC) of Montgomery County. The LDC will distribute the questionnaire to candidates for office in the 2024 Democratic primary in Montgomery County for the 2024 early vote. Please submit your responses by April 5th, 2024, to ldcendorsements@gmail.com. **Please limit your response to each question to 200 words or less. Your response will be shared on our website unless you explicitly opt-out;** therefore, we encourage you to submit your responses in English and Spanish to make them accessible to all members of our community.

Campaign Profile:

Please attach a brief personal bio with your submission

Laura Stewart is a mom of two and has been a community and PTA leader advocating for our children, schools, and communities for over a decade. She has served in many leadership positions, successfully advocating for accountability, transparency, school funding, healthy schools, mental health and equity in education. She was born in Memphis, Tennessee and grew up in DC and Bowie, MD where she attended Temple Solel and graduated from Bowie High School where she enjoyed playing in musical groups. She has a Paralegal Degree from Prince George's Community College and she worked in telecommunications for ten years. Laura moved to Montgomery County in 1997 and raised two boys who graduated from MCPS. One is a UMD graduate, now attending graduate school as a research fellow and the other is studying at UMBC. She lives with her husband who works at a union. She taught music lessons until Covid-19 hit our community and schools, at which time she became a full time volunteer.

Candidate Name: Laura M. Stewart

Office You Are Seeking: Montgomery County Board of Education, District 4

Candidate Contact Email: Laura@LauraStewart.org

Candidate Contact Number: 240-601-9519

Campaign Website and Social Media Handles (Facebook/Twitter/Instagram):

www.LauraStewart.org

Facebook: @laura.stewart.for.boe

Twitter: @laurastewartboe

Instagram: stewart.laura

Amount Raised (include as of date): \$14,634

April 5, 2024

Cash on Hand: \$10,946.48

April 5, 2024

Other Endorsements: MCEA, MCPSRA, Progressive Neighbors

1. Latinx Engagement

Please provide details of your prior involvement or work with the Latinx/Hispanic community in Maryland.

As the Montgomery County VP for Advocacy, I worked with CASA and Identity to advocate for the Blueprint for Maryland's Future passed, planning a Montgomery County Town Hall. Before the Town Hall, we met in a workgroup to bring the community school model to MCPS. As VP of Advocacy, I also was the MCCPTA liaison to the Black and Brown Coalition and I amplified their platform to the Board of Education. I also attended community partner meetings and worked with members of the

community to get vaccines, food and other services to the Latinx community. As the MCCPTA Einstein Cluster Coordinator and Downcounty Area VP, I have assisted in bringing the concerns of Latinx/Hispanic students and families to the board, including the need for more Spanish speaking staff. MCCPTA also brought a substance use prevention forum to Kennedy HS and I've personally brought concerns on the Title 1 loss in school funding to the county council. I attended the CHEER town hall at Oak View Elementary School.

2. Housing

According to a study done by Montgomery County planning, those who identify as Hispanic/Latinx are more likely to pay more than 30% of their income on housing than residents of the County overall. This is most pronounced for Hispanic and Latinx renters, among whom 62% are burdened by housing costs. What would be your solution for affordable and quality housing?

If elected a Board of Education candidate, we won't have the opportunity to solve the affordable housing issues, but our decisions do affect housing in our county and housing greatly affects students. There is a clear correlation between mobility rates and [graduation rates](#). Housing cost is also related to school reputation. I testified for Delegate Moon's bill that notifies home buyers that school boundaries can change. As the MCCPTA Capital Improvements Chair, I have consistently worked with the County Council toward balancing efforts to ensure adequate safe and affordable housing with the need to fund the education of the residents of those homes. I've advocated for a sliding scale impact tax to encourage more affordable family housing. As a member of the Maryland Education Coalition, I also supported HB 428, Rental Assistance for Community Schools, although I was disappointed that they took out the 10 million dollar funding requirement.

3. Mental Health and health

How would you approach the need to both increase access to mental health services among Latino residents and address the shortage of linguistically and culturally competent mental health care professionals? Especially among Latino youth?

We could address the shortage of mental health care professionals by supporting a career track program for students interested in the behavioral sciences, much like the one we have for biotech, encouraging Latino students to apply and offering mentoring programs as well. Scholarships for post graduation are necessary as well. Expanding Grow Your Own programs can be a solution.

MCPS and Montgomery County have done some work towards accessing mental health services through our school-based health centers, hiring 35 full time social workers, adding the Bridge to Wellness program and Wellbeing teams in our high schools. We still do not have all the resources our students and families need, but what we do have needs to be more accessible. Many students and families do not know what resources exist, whether they are available to their family, or how to access them. MCPS can do more to make those resources more visible and accessible by providing school specific lists of services as well as countywide resources right on each school website in multiple languages as we did with the COVID-19 related information.

4. Fentanyl

The fentanyl crisis has been devastating our community. In Montgomery County, we have seen it disproportionately affect our Latinx/Hispanic youth. How do you recommend that we address this issue?

This is a nationwide concern , not just here, and it is devastating. The BOE can encourage and support more partnerships with community coalitions like Montgomery Goes Purple that bring together MCPS, MCPD, MCFRS, Identity, faith based organizations, County agencies, hospitals and other providers to educate families and students about the dangers and signs of substance use, support prevention, harm reduction - such as free Narcan & training - intervention, and advocate for more equitable access to treatment facilities and providers for adolescents in need of services. MCPS can be a great conduit for that information and

better train our staff to address the root causes and connect students with services at the earliest sign of substance use. One other note, fentanyl is not the only cause for concern. Alcohol, cocaine, methamphetamine, and benzodiazepines are also impacting, and sometimes taking, the lives of MCPS students. We must vigilantly track trends and do all we can to make sure students feel welcome, included, supported, and hopeful. Most of all, they need to feel connected, at school, at home, and in the community. Connection is the opposite of addiction, so disconnecting students from school and extracurriculars because of substance use is counterproductive. We can fix that.

5. Education

- a. Hispanic/Latinx students are the fastest-growing ethnic group in MCPS, with 34% of the student population. The graduation gap of Latinx students has been exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic. How would you address the truancy rate in the Latino community and close achievement gaps?

We must take a whole person approach. If a student is missing school we need to know if they have safe and stable housing, do they have enough food, are they healthy and have any medications and treatments they need, are they anxious or depressed and need mental health care, are they using substances, are they working outside of the home and/or caring for younger children in the home, do they have sufficient, seasonally appropriate clothing and a way to launder the clothing, do they have reliable transportation, do they have an alarm clock? Obviously, assigning punishment will not change any of those underlying causes.

COVID-19 has also caused children to be less engaged in social environments. Extracurriculars are an entry point for engagement. Staff and fellow students should include direct invites to clubs and other extracurricular activities, even if a child is struggling academically. I would ask for a pilot program to look at this direct invitation model. The Community School model, using telehealth to connect children with mental health services, high intensity tutoring, implementing intervention

teams, mentoring, and more access to CTE can all be tools to attack the achievement gap.

6. Crime

Studies show that crime is one of the most pressing issues for Latinx/Hispanic voters. How will you work to both improve public safety, as crime is rising in our communities, and make the criminal justice system in Montgomery County more equitable?

We need to understand the underlying issues. A child who feels threatened, may carry a weapon or associate themselves with others they feel can protect them and make them feel connected. I would ensure all families received information on safe storage of weapons in different languages to reduce access to weapons. If a child, or their family, has unmet needs like food, they may seek to fill that need by taking. MCPS should provide free food for all children. If they are unhoused, they may find themselves in legal trouble for just being somewhere without permission. PPWs and Community School Coordinators can link families with housing assistance. I also propose implementing Schools Safety and Climate Teams composed of all stakeholders and community providers at every school in order to do a needs assessment on safety measures, and then submitting these assessments to the superintendent so that dollars may be aimed at each school's safety needs. There should be increased coordination with the Community Engagement Officers school administration, and if these safety teams are implemented, the CEOs should also be engaged with the teams. MCPS is the most child facing entity in the county, we must connect with struggling students.

7. Business and economic prosperity

Small businesses are the engine of economic growth and are critical to the financial health of the Latinx/Hispanic community. What would you do to strengthen and create Latino-owned small businesses?

Financial literacy curriculum should be implemented in every child's education. All high school students should have the option to take a

financial literacy course and we should work towards prioritizing that by looking at graduation requirements holistically. Business creation pathways should be expanded. MCPS should look into Shark Tank style competitions with entrepreneurial mentors to guide students to business creation and ownership. We could work with property owners with empty storefronts to foster seasonal or periodic pop-up markets for students to test their business ideas and acumen as they earn some money to grow their business. We should continue to offer language classes after graduation so that entrepreneurs continue to acquire language skills that could help them in growing their businesses.

8. Immigration

- a. What programs or legislation do you think would best support our immigration residents who do not have access to federal funding in Montgomery County?

The advantage of offering services and programs within our schools is that they are available to all students. That helps us offer health and wellness services like checkups, immunizations, and physicals in our school-based wellness centers which helps keep students in school and eligible to play sports. Mental health services and substance use prevention services are being offered. Montgomery County funds access to medical care, housing, and food, for persons in need without regard for immigration status. MCPS should work towards Universal Meals for all, but without punishing schools with large Hispanic/Latinx populations by not collecting income data separately from community eligibility certification (CEP) for Title 1 determination. We should extend the MCPS Welcome Center model. They recognized that sending newly arrived families to multiple locations to get foundational services created hardships and inequities that let many fall through the gaps. They addressed it by bringing most of those entities - from county agencies to

community organizations - under the same roof for a one-stop-shop. When families arrive, they only need to walk through the halls to access services, not traverse the county. State legislation to facilitate access to health insurance and college is also under consideration this year.

9. Asylum

Do you support a comprehensive immigration reform that better supports and protects those who have been displaced by war and seek asylum? If elected, what would your priorities be to change our current system?

While this is out of the scope of responsibilities of Board of Education members, I fully support laws that help children and their families be and feel safe and accepted and I will continue to advocate for our federal legislators to pass such reforms. I will also encourage everyone, elected or not, to avoid language and actions that only serve to divide us and make people feel unwelcome or worth less than another resident. Our country was founded by immigrants and our county is one of the most diverse counties in the nation with over 150 languages spoken here. I welcome everyone.