**Candidate Questionnaire
2018 Anne Arundel County Board of Education**

Take Action AAC and its parent, Progressive Maryland, are grassroots, community-based organizations that work to progress social, environmental, economic, and racial justice, and to advance the principle that all individuals and groups are entitled to fair and impartial treatment, equality, and equal opportunity. Elected officials have an enormous impact on our efforts to reduce inequality and improve the lives of residents all over the county and the state.  It is our responsibility to not only advocate for residents, but also to empower them to engage in the political process at every level.  To that end, Take Action AAC supports candidates who work to build a society and economy that works for all Marylanders, with special emphasis on traditionally marginalized groups.

To be considered for our endorsement for the Anne Arundel County Board of Education, please complete this questionnaire, including sources of funding and specific examples where appropriate.  Return the completed questionnaire to TakeActionAAC@gmail.com, **no later than 5 p.m. on Friday, June 8, 2018.**  Your responses will be available to the public at ProgressiveMaryland.org and TakeActionAAC.com.

**Candidate Information**

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| **Candidate Information** |
| Name | **Melissa Ellis** |
| Office Seeking | **Board of Education** |
| District | **Anne Arundel County Councilmanic District 4** |
| Party | **Unaffiliated**  |
| Cell Phone | **410-562-5503** |
| Email Address | **melissaellisboe@gmail.com** |
| **Campaign Contact Information** |
| Committee Name | **Friends of Melissa Ellis** |
| Street Address | **1333 Generals Highway, P.O. Box 283** |
| City | **Crownsville** |
| Zip Code | **21032** |
| Business Phone | **410-923-4598** |
| Fax |  |
| Campaign Website | **www.votemelissaellis.com** |
| **Treasurer Contact Information** |
| Treasurer Name | Melissa G. Stanton |
| Street Address |  |
| City |  |
| Zip Code |  |
| Phone |  |

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| **Candidate History** |
| Previous Elected Office | Years Served | Major Endorsements |
| n/a |  |  |
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| **Progressive Maryland / Take Action AAC**  |
| Have you ever been endorsed by Progressive Maryland, and for what office(s)? |
| No, I have never run for office before.  |
| Have you ever assisted Progressive Maryland in achieving its goals?  |
| While I have not assisted Progressive Maryland as an organization directly, I have been vocal about ensuring equitable treatment of students and teachers in our schools and creating policy and practices that support all students.  |

**Questions**:

1. Recent events across the country have highlighted the myriad challenges facing students and society. These include mental health issues (including suicide), opioid and alcohol addiction, bullying, harassment, hate crimes, and more. In addition, school shootings increase stress and remove school as a place of safety and security. How would you rate AACPS’s performance supporting students in these areas, what continuing concerns do you have, and what specific recommendations would you make?

This issue is at the center of my platform. I do think AACPS does a fairly good job with school security measures as far as facilities go, though there is a need to bring all buildings to the level of security that some of our more updated buildings have. I am also aware of the need to ensure all staff and students are consistently following policies related to school security, as some schools are falling short in adhering to current policies.

The area we need to focus our attention on is the climate in our schools that may be contributing to the increase in mental health issues including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicide, and other forms of violence. I believe there are several factors throughout society contributing to this nationwide epidemic, but we need to look at this at the local level and address our students directly. The first priority should be to reduce class sizes to reasonable levels, create retention strategies that reflect the value we pace in our most effective teachers, and employ enough guidance counselors and psychologists to bring their caseloads down to recommended sizes. Next, we need to look at testing, grading policies, and curriculum overall to create a healthier and more meaningful experience for all students. We also need to reduce the physical stress which feeds the emotional stress of students by ensuring school hours for all students fit within the guidelines given by medical professionals based on well-established scientific study. We need to encourage all parents and give them greater support and opportunity to be more involved in their children’s education beyond supporting the PTSA. Parent involvement is a proven factor in student academic success. Finally, we need to integrate our schools more with the community, bringing in community organizations, businesses, and mentors to work with students and establish connections that will help make education more meaningful and carry on outside of school.

1. Anne Arundel county covers a large geographical area that includes semi-urban, suburban, and rural areas, each with its own challenges. Access to school sponsored activities, support services, and career preparation opportunities can be limited because of physical distance, lack of public transportation (particularly in south county), and other challenges. Similarly, school board meetings occur at times and a location that make it difficult for many to attend.
How do you recommend that the Board improve student access to services and opportunities? What steps can the board take to make it easier for county residents to be engaged in board deliberations and decision-making?

I believe activity buses need to be available for all high schools, allowing all students the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities without transportation being an issue. Greater partnerships between the school and community should also exist supporting activities like mentorships, perhaps organization of carpools, and a buddy system, connecting younger students with older students with similar interests who may be able to guide them to success. One of my greatest concerns with our current board is how inaccessible residents find them to be. I am not aware of what need there is to have daytime board meetings, but board meetings should occur during the evening hours. I believe every citizen who contacts a board member or who testifies at a board meeting deserves some sort of follow-up to their issue to acknowledge that their concern was heard and whether an action will be taken as a result. I also firmly believe that board members should be more visible and participate in community activities that enables them to engage with residents more as board members. For example, as a candidate, I recently had a booth at a local festival giving me the opportunity to connect with voters. As a board member, I would love to have a booth at that event, connecting with residents and giving them the opportunity to share their views in a friendly dialogue rather than testimony at a formal board meeting with no opportunity for dialogue being their only access to board members.

1. Anne Arundel County is home to some of the most beautiful scenery and environmental treasures in the country. How can AACPS better utilize this unique environment as an educational resource, to prepare students for environmentally-focused careers, and to convey the critical need to respect and care for our environment?

As a nation, our students spend less time outside than children in schools in all other parts of the world. Students have little connection to nature. Teaching them about the environment in a classroom without the opportunity to make the connection through experience, experience beyond the occasional field trip, is a missed opportunity. In all subjects, students would perform better with the opportunity to physically and/or mentally explore. This is especially true with science. Students will naturally care more about our environment if they are able to experience it more for themselves, but many will go beyond appreciation and develop a love that will lead them to a career in environmental and biological sciences. I would like to see each school utilize their unique environment to create outdoor classrooms, including gardens to tend and even animals to care for where appropriate. Exposure to the outdoors has proven biological and psychological benefits. Having gardens to tend could lead to improvements in nutrition if students have the opportunity to grow and then even prepare foods, creating a greater interest in eating nutritious, whole foods. Education in general should be a much more hands-on and holistic experience which benefits the student individually and society as a whole.

1. Anne Arundel is one of the wealthiest of Maryland’s 19 counties. However, our teacher salaries rank near the bottom. These poor salaries, overcrowded schools, large class sizes, and lack of supports – guidance counselors, mental health providers, teaching specialists, and teacher’s assistants in particular – are some causes of AACPS’ teacher retention problems. How can the board increase retention among teachers and other critical staff?

Teacher retention is a cost-effective strategy for student success. My experience with human resources and recruiting taught me that turnover is a very costly thing for any organization to experience. I helped manage a company through a difficult situation when our growing company was hiring nurses to keep up with growth during a nursing shortage. We discovered an issue with pay equity when it was costing more to hire experienced nurses as the supply of nurses was shrinking and not keeping up with demand. We went through a costly market analysis to determine where our veteran nurses should be with compensation in order to remain competitive in the market place. While it cost our company many thousands in the short term to give raises outside of our regular annual review process, we recognized the cost-effectiveness of not putting ourselves behind on hiring and instead spending even more money on recruitment and driving up the market even further. We must pay our teachers at a rate that is competitive with surrounding counties. We must hire enough teachers to bring class sizes to more manageable levels. We must bring guidance counselors caseloads to recommended levels which are currently up to 3X the level they should be. Bringing in more teaching assistants will also give our students more opportunity for the attention they may need while they are trying to learn. Over the past decade, spending at central office has increased at 3X the rate is has increased in our schools. Over the time that I have been attending board meetings and observing the workings of our school system, I have seen that we have an outdated transportation routing system and have wasted tax dollars taking years to roll out routing software, and I have observed budget surpluses that are not sufficiently accounted for. I believe we need a thorough audit of current spending and look for waste and inefficiencies, driving our dollars back into the classroom with proper levels of staffing and competitive compensation for our teachers. Once that is accomplished, I believe we will have an even better case for asking for any additional funding that is needed to achieving these important goals.

1. Private industry frequently partners with public entities, allowing both to meet their goals. The downside of this partnership can be the perception that the process is not transparent, critical information is hidden, outcomes are predetermined or made behind closed doors, and profit is prioritized over students. AACPS is not immune to this, nor is it immune to concerns about the influence that campaign donors might have over board decisions. What steps can the board take to counter these concerns? Please include in your response whether candidates for the Board of Education should accept cash or in-kind campaign donations from businesses or organizations and if you plan to do so during this election cycle. If candidates do accept these donations, what policies should the school board have in place to eliminate the above concerns?

I believe transparency is critical and citizens should be able to see and hear how decisions are made by the board. I am not anti-private industry and actually advocate for greater partnerships between our school system and local businesses, but we do have to be transparent. There is an issue with campaign finance in Anne Arundel County. It is very expensive to run for office, and this creates a lot of issues both in the quality of candidates that may run and how those candidates then focus their efforts in campaigning. It costs money to for a candidate to get their name out there. This fact may be a deterrent for some highly qualified individuals who would otherwise become candidates. I have met with several very active citizens who are very effective at advocating for other citizens but have said that campaigning is not for them because of the fundraising demands. I have not been as effective as I would like in fundraising as I have been spending my campaign efforts in meeting with all of the stakeholders in order to understand the many needs in our school system and creating and communicating my vision for how to make our schools work for every student. I will not accept money from any company which could be contracted by our school system to do work. That would be a conflict of interest. I will accept money from individuals and organizations that believe in my vision and support my views as I have already stated them, or simply believe I will be the best advocate for our students. I have been clear and consistent on where my priorities are, and I find people from both sides of the aisle politically are drawn to my message. I am proud to gain the confidence of so many people and organizations from all corners of our very diverse county, and I am confident that my goals for improving education for the students of District 4 will benefit every student in Anne Arundel County. As far as board member candidates receiving donations from private industry, that candidate should recuse himself or herself from voting on board matters or even communicating with board members on those matters. I do know of a current board member who represented the board at a meeting between a communications company and citizens regarding the placement of a cell phone tower on the grounds of and elementary school. That board member then gave feedback to the rest of the board before they took a vote on to allow for the placement of that tower. That board member is now a candidate in this election and received money from the communications company. This issue is very emotional for so many parents who are understandably frightened for the health of their young children. The handling of this matter has been made even more troublesome for these families in light of this board member’s acceptance of this donation. That board member should not have accepted that donation in this situation if he was to vote on this matter and influence other board members. There is a real need, however, for campaign finance reform to allow candidates to reach voters without the need for high dollar donations.

1. The AACPS budget is the clearest way to demonstrate board priorities. What are your priorities, and how would you ensure equity of services across the system? What decisions should be left to school leadership, and which should be determined by the Board and superintendent? Please incorporate examples that either support or run counter to your position.

As the first candidate to file to run for the Board of Education, my priorities have been clearly stated from the very beginning of my campaign. In general, the focus of the budget needs to be spending in our schools, directly benefiting the students. Specifically, adequate staffing, effective retention strategies including competitive compensation for staff working in our schools, rich and engaging curriculum with an emphasis on developing the mind above the focus on performing tasks (including less testing), and developing strategies to improve the climate and relationships in our schools so they operate less as an institution and more as a community. As far as equity of services, the above priorities are system-wide and benefit every student regardless of background. I do advocate for bringing back the bonus for teachers working in our more challenged schools. This factors into retention strategies and ensures greater equity in retaining experienced teachers. We also need to focus our recruiting efforts on bringing in more diversity in our staffing to more closely reflect the student body. Research indicates that students achieve more academically when they have at least one teacher of the same race or ethnic background. I’m sure that effect is even greater the more diverse the teaching staff is. We can also meet some of these deficiencies in current staffing by bringing in community members and organizations to mentor and work with students. This vision has to be set by the board and the administration held accountable for meeting these goals through regular review of the schools system’s actions and the administration’s performance. In other words, the strategy developed by the administration has to be clear and specific based on research or otherwise proven practices and must be monitored regularly for effectiveness.

1. Across the country, including in Anne Arundel County, acts of hate, intolerance, and exclusion that run counter to the ideals captured in the Constitution are on the rise. A strong society requires a commitment by all to active social, political, and economic engagement. How can or should AACPS and the Board help create engaged members of society?

Some of the strategies mentioned above in regards to diversity in staffing and community involvement will go a long way in beginning to break down some of the tension and hateful acts that result. I believe we need to look beyond diversity and sensitivity training and start looking for real, effective strategies. I was so excited to read an article about the newly elected student member of the board, Josie Urrea, who proposes greater community involvement in addressing race issues and rolling out a program similar to the “Not My Child” panels that were created to address the opioid crisis. This program has proven to be very impactful on the community. This is exactly the type of approach I have advocated for in solving many issues in our schools, getting creative and finding proven strategies rather than just doing something about it. I also advocate for team-building exercises and finding strategies to allow students to see their similarities above their differences. Again, we need to create greater community within our schools that also includes greater parent involvement above PTSA activities. All of the issues that exist in our schools, academic stresses, the achievement gap, student mental health, racial/cultural/religious intolerance and/or insensitivity, will be alleviated by creating a greater sense of community within our schools. Of course there should be no tolerance for hate or acts of violence, but we need to seek to understand where this is coming from and break down those factors. I believe this can be achieved when school is a healthy place for students to develop as individuals within a community rather than academic performers in competition with each other for the highest GPA. . When a child walks through the doors of their school, that child is a whole person going through many critical changes as they develop and grow. It is time for school systems to recognize their part in the development of our citizens beyond just teaching academics. There is much we can do to create engaged members of society, and we must.