



## CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

### **CITY COUNCIL 1<sup>st</sup> DISTRICT CANDIDATE: ZEKE COHEN, DEMOCRAT**

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**1. Please articulate your overall vision for how young people will be supported from cradle to career in Baltimore City? What will be the priority strategies within your first four years in implementing this vision?**

As a former Baltimore City Teacher and current director of a youth leadership non-profit, I know that children in Baltimore need significant support. Many of our children have mental and physical health challenges caused by living in poverty and high stress environments. Many of them lack decent, reliable transit to and from school. And once at school, they so often find themselves in buildings that lack heat in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, and sometimes are without running water. The non-profit I founded and run teaches young people civic leadership skills. But it also provides wrap-around supports to meet their needs after school and during breaks in the school year. I am passionate about improving the lives of young people in Baltimore. I will bring that same passion to city hall.

My plan begins with building a coalition with the Mayor and other members of the City Council around the goal of implementing universal pre-K, which is an investment in our children's future that we can't afford not to make. Beyond that, I plan to advocate for childcare subsidies, so working parents have access to high-quality childcare, allowing them to focus on employment opportunities; I plan to fully fund community schools and after-school programs; and I plan to create a new partnership between school system and health department to address the lack of mental health provisions for the young people of Baltimore.

**2. The Mayor and City Council do not currently have oversight authority over Baltimore City Public Schools. Would you advocate changing the current city/state partnership? What changes would you recommend to the overall administration/approach of public education in Baltimore City?**

Yes, I believe Baltimore should have oversight authority over its school system. Moreover, I believe Baltimore is capable of managing the city schools without State-level management. I think the buck should stop with the Mayor and City Council. Baltimore city officials are better equipped to respond to the needs of Baltimore city students. I think that we can and should be responsible for our own schools, and I would advocate for a restructuring of the city-state partnership in order to give the Mayor and City Council more control over City Schools. Lastly, I would also recommend a joint-appointed and elected school board.

**3. Eighty percent of a young person's life is spent outside of school, yet just 15% of Baltimore's school aged young people have access to afterschool programs. City leaders from around the country have begun to identify the importance of afterschool and summer programs as a critical support and have invested in citywide systems. Participation in out-of-school time opportunities boosts academics, attendances, school promotion and completion and it helps connects young people to caring adults. If elected, what would your approach be to addressing opportunities for youth beyond the school day and school year?**



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As a young teacher in West Baltimore, I started a program called the Books and Basketball Club. The first day, we expected 15-20 children, when, in fact, 90 children showed up. Hardly any books were read on that first day, and basketballs were being tossed around haphazardly. But after a week of the kids consistently showing up (and books finally starting to be read) we proved that if you give children in Baltimore something fun and productive to do, they will respond enthusiastically.

I find it reprehensible that the mayor has cut 20 recreation centers and has defunded after-school activities around Baltimore. In my current role with my non-profit I've focused on getting students engaged in their city by helping them pass two laws: The Dream Act and the Firearm Safety Act. By having a public role, I've seen young people transform into agents of change. They gain agency and leadership.

Baltimore's young people need out-of-school programs. I see this as a critical investment, and one that is connect to health, public safety etc. I would increase the city's commitment to funding after-school programs and recreation centers. I would also work with the foundations and business community to increase private funding to after-school programs.

***4. In the 70's and 80's Baltimore operated around 130 recreation centers. That decreased by nearly half by the early 90's. Currently, Recreation & Parks operates just 40 recreation centers. There are ongoing questions about the available resources of the Department based on the lack of audits. Some of the recreation centers require major upgrades in both physical plant and programming. While a few new, modern recreation centers and being built, it is clear that many neighborhoods lack quality recreational opportunities. How would you change the trajectory of Recreation and Parks? How will you address the challenges of programming and physical plants?***

I've heard from countless older people throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> District that having a recreation center kept them out of trouble. One of them, Sam Mitchell, grew up around Highlandtown and said that, back in his day, the kids would all hang out at the rec centers. They kept him and his friends off the streets and gave them something to do. He believes he is living today, a proud retiree of the electricians' union, because those centers kept him out of trouble. As he said to me on his doorstep: "Maybe if the city would rebuild its Rec Centers, we wouldn't have to spend so much on police."

In order to fund these necessary institutions, we need immediate and consistent public audits of Parks and Recreation, as well as every other city agency. We need to make fully funding recreation centers a priority, without reducing the amount of centers that are available. We need to invest in our youth.

***5. Young people want jobs and they are natural entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, youth unemployment is at an all time high and young people are denied the experiences and skills they need to be prepared to enter the workforce. If elected, what will be your approach to youth employment and entrepreneurship? How will you partner with Higher Education and Industry?***

The students at my non-profit did an ethnographic survey and found that people in Baltimore thought the uptick in violence was caused by lack of youth opportunities and dearth of youth jobs. So we set a goal to create one youth job for each life lost to violence in 2013. This was the beginning of our "235



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Lives” campaign. In order to achieve this goal, we partnered with Southeast CDC, Banner Neighborhoods, local churches and small businesses. So far we’ve created 28 youth jobs from small businesses. Our students have been our most effective advocates: when they approach local businesses with this proposal, the business owners want to hire. We need to make the case that hiring youth is not charity but should be seen as responsible economic development.

As a member of the City Council, I will work with churches, non-profits, businesses, and other agencies in order to expand that project. I will also allocate more money for MOED so that they can do more robust training and oversight. Finally, I will work to strengthen and expand our trade schools, and create more robust partnerships between businesses, unions, and high schools.

***6. The resilient young people of Baltimore City experience trauma every day. They are both witness to and victims of violence. They have very real reasons to feel stressed and afraid. A growing body of research recognizes the importance of understanding and implementing trauma informed care within schools, community services, social services, and law enforcement. What approaches will you take, if elected, to implement trauma-informed-care and/or restorative practices in the public sectors?***

So many of the young people in my program have been deeply traumatized. One of my students, Dawnya, grew up in the foster system and experienced abuse, neglect, and violence. Dealing with her trauma took counseling and a ton of work and support from our organization. Today she is SGA President of Goucher, and just recently she spoke at the White House. This kind of transformation is possible for all of our kids. But to reach this goal, we need more after-school programs, as well as a better partnership between schools and the health department focusing specifically on mental health. Lastly, we need to train our teachers, police, and other practitioners that work with young people to be sensitive to the effects of trauma and the need of trauma survivors. Trauma informed care is critical for those that work with our children.

***7. In 2014, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake, with the support of City Council, established one of the strictest youth curfew laws in the nation and advocated for year round curfew centers. Proponents of the curfew centers thought they were a good strategy to keep kids safe and to connect young people and their families to services. Opponents feared the curfew enforcement would further strain police community relations and disproportionately target young people of color. Questions remain about the actual utilization of the curfew centers and whether or not the “Youth Connection Centers” serve their intended purpose. If you are elected, what would your position on Curfew and Curfew Centers be? How would you build more positive interactions between youth and law enforcement?***

I understand why the mayor wanted to use this strategy, but we were promised that there would be support services at the centers. Thus far, the city has not made good on that promise. In order to address this problem, I would work with non-profits and other groups to engage them around staffing and supporting the centers. The centers won’t have a positive impact on our youth unless they provide support services for both kids and families. We should also set clear metrics, goals, and benchmarks for these centers. They should not be used just as a tool to punish delinquent children and inattentive parents, but to bring resources to struggling families. And if they aren’t living up to the challenge, we should do away with them and reconsider the curfew law.



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**8. *The parents and families of young people are often left out of the equation when we are seeking solutions. Family and community engagement requires long term, sustained efforts to build trust and offer authentic opportunities for families to have a voice and feel supported. The Community School strategy has been shown to increase family and community engagement and improve school climate and culture. The city funded community school strategy is currently operating in 50 schools out of 180. Do you think every school should be a community school? How would you expand the strategy?***

I think every school should be a community school. One of the best success stories in the city is Wolfe Street Academy, which went from being one of the worst schools in the city to its current place as one of the best in Baltimore. This is the direct result of becoming a community school and engaging with Hispanic parents.

In order for the strategy of turning every school into a community school to work, we need a clear definition of what constitutes a “community school.” It can’t be just another political buzz-word. And if we want to see this strategy through, we need to fully empower a **community school coordinator** to do the organizing through partnerships. When my brother worked for the Child First Authority, I saw him move several initiatives forward by partnering with students, parents, teachers and principals. This is a great initiative, but it needs the political support and funding to make it work.

**9. *The Baltimore City Health Department provides chilling statistics in its 2014 Health Disparities Report. Factors of race, gender, economics, and zip code can all be determining factors for a short and painful life, and the trajectories begin even before birth. Given what we know now about what works, how will you approach making sure every child has the opportunity to grow up to become a healthy adult?***

First, we need to focus on all of the factors that contribute to health disparities, **including access to health care and nutritious food**. Next, we need to deal with transit, **not only expanding our transit system but making sure it runs efficiently and predictably**. Then we need to tackle our lack of recreation centers, our failing schools, and our housing issues. Moreover, we need to educate the public to show that none of these things exist in a vacuum, and that in order to have success, we need to address them all.

When we engage kids in the decisions that impact their lives, we empower them and give them the tools to empower others. My work at The Intersection has shown that young people can be incredible advocates, both for themselves and their peers.

**10. *The bright green footprints painted on Baltimore City sidewalks are supposed to denote safe walking passageways for children to get to school. However well intentioned, the reality is that in many neighborhoods there are no safe passageways, and green footprints cut through active drug and gang territory. With schools of choice, some older students are traveling more than 2 hours both morning and evening on unreliable and sometime unsafe public transportation. What will you do when elected to make sure young people can make it to school every day safely?***



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I will work on strengthening community schools so that neighborhood schools in low-income areas aren't seen as dumping grounds for the most disadvantaged kids. Also, I will work on improving MTA and public transit, so that kids can get to school safely and on-time.