I Hate Politics Episode 166: Double-header: Sam Ross for MCPS SMOB

Introduction

[00:00:00] Sunil Dasgupta: I Hate Politics is a podcast about a human activity we love to hate, and this is the I Hate Politics candidate interview with Samantha Ross, for student member of the Montgomery County Board of Education.

[00:00:21] Sunil Dasgupta: I'm Sunil Dasgupta, host of I Hate Politics, a podcast about our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools and streets, and our local governments as they function in diverse, democratic and sometimes divided societies. As part of the show, we have conversations with local, state, and sometimes federal candidates rather than ask how they stand on a multitude of issues, these conversations go in depth on a few issues. For this episode, my guest is not the usual political candidate who you can vote for, but Samantha Ross, a Montgomery Blair High School junior, one of the two finalists running to be the student member of the Montgomery County Board of Education for the next school year, 2024, 25, this SMOB, as the position is known, is one of the eight members of the county school board and selected by secondary students in the county. That is all MCPS students in 6th grade and up get to vote, not all school boards around the country or even in Maryland have student members, and even when they have them, they may not have full voting rights. In Montgomery County they are coequal with other regularly elected school board members, except they cannot vote on personnel matters, the small election is on April 17th and will select the 47th student member. Ross's opponent is Clarksburg High School junior Praneel Suvarna, whose interview you can find in the accompanying episode. Music for this episode are two short original piano compositions from Kensington resident Adam Barbrow. If you want to share your music on the show or know someone else who might want to, please email us at producer@IHPpod.org.

Interview with Sam Ross

[00:02:31] Sunil Dasgupta: Sam Ross, welcome to I Hate Politics.

[00:02:35] Sam Ross: I'm happy to be here I, I can't say that I truly hate politics, but I do love education, so here I am.

[00:02:41] Sunil Dasgupta: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Uh, where did you go to school? What do you study? What do you like doing?

[00:02:48] Sam Ross: My name's Sam Ross, uh, short for Samantha, but no one calls me that. I'm a junior at Montgomery Blair High School, I live in the Takoma Park Silver Spring area. I'm really interested in the areas of public policy and education, Um, I can't say that they're what I study right now because we do have a mandated high school curriculum, but they are what I hope to study in the future, outside of school and outside of general advocacy in politics, I like to do gymnastics, I love to row, like to go on hikes, and I love to watch movies.

[00:03:18] Sunil Dasgupta: Let's start with what this SMOB race is about.

[00:03:23] Sam Ross: In the greater picture, the SMOB race is about making sure when we look past all of the changes that have been going on in MCPS right now, all of the criticism that has been levied against the board and against leadership, the students are included in wherever we walk next. Um, some things that are really important to me, which, you know, probably won't get me the votes if I say them, but that I keep in the back of my mind are the superintendent search, making sure students are included in that. Um, making sure students are included in and, you know, the same energy is kept for a lot of the revisions that they're doing right now to bullying and harassment policy, to reporting systems. Um, I hear all the time from students, you know, I feel like my report went nowhere, um, there was no real consequence given to the people who, you know, did this to me. And as we look really carefully at changing that for staff, and to make sure that same care is put into the processes for students.

[00:04:28] Sunil Dasgupta: When you say involved, isn't involvement about the process, right? We just, we want to be there at the table but, or is it about we want to be at the table to get A, B, or C?

[00:04:42] Sam Ross: Beyond what's basically written in the job description, I don't have too much that I want, I think most students kind of follow that. I think students kind of differ from teachers and parents in that way, but what is important is inclusion because, you know, it might come up that, you know, teachers, parents want this out of a superintendent, but students might have a different or um you know, different process view than them.

[00:05:08] Sunil Dasgupta: But what is an example of that? I mean, what do students want that is different from what parents and teachers probably want?

[00:05:14] Sam Ross: Students tend, at least in my view, to care more about diversity, inclusive curriculum is a big one Uh, it's obviously been a very divisive topic recently. Additionally, for the budget, budget priorities are always something that is very divided you know, teachers in their salaries, parents want, you know, specific things for their school, students want specific things for their school, such as, um, more, it's, it's like to say more quality of life stuff, funding for the extracurriculars for their sports for. Um, building operations, HVAC is always a huge one, ensuring that, um, school lunches of a high quality caliber, that the instructional materials which they get, you know, are not falling apart.

[00:06:07] Sunil Dasgupta: The board essentially has to balance between these different um interests, right? How do you think that balance should be done? In the context of the current problems that are there so for example, you know, attendance policy.

[00:06:26] Sam Ross: From the different contexts I mean, I, I just believe in bringing everyone together I think the the best way to utilize your voice is to identify the problems cause especially when it comes to attendance. Teachers can have their reasons they believe students are coming to school, parents can have their reasons that they believe students are coming, aren't coming to school. You know, who can really tell you why students aren't coming to school, it's the students who aren't coming to school.

[00:06:52] Sunil Dasgupta: I am concerned that you know, we don't actually have any way to listen to the students that are not even coming to school, let alone wanting to participate in the uh superintendent search.

[00:07:05] Sam Ross: And that's where I think MCPS needs to improve in terms of communication, in terms of bringing stakeholder groups together, um. There with with attendance specifically, there have been a lot of positive programs which have um at the middle school level, the truancy prevention program. There are students who didn't come to school for an extended period of time, you can go ask because now they're in this great program. If we work on more interventions like that, that's more students that can reach because we have them back, we have them back engaged in the community, we have them back in school. And I think, you know, the same can go for English language learners, for example, yes, they are harder to reach because they speak a different language, but when you meet them where they are with their language or with, you know, versions of English which might be more understandable than learning English is a process, that's where you can bring them back in and understand their perspectives and experiences I think you've got to go about it the same way that you reinforce the importance of school, you know. You're interested in being a physician's assistant, you know, you need to go to school in order to make that happen, you should also maybe look into joining the Health Occupations Association of America, maybe you should look into joining future medical leaders of America. Um, creating that same kind of mindset for students, creating that same kind of culture shift in terms of school is important for you and for your dreams, you as a person. That same energy towards extracurricular development and activities, I think that's really important because it really goes for almost any path that you want to take in life.

[00:08:47] Sunil Dasgupta: The same disinterest that students have toward um class work seems it is you know, also a level of disinterest towards clubs. What is the role of this SMOB in and harnessing that energy?

[00:09:04] Sam Ross: Well, I often like to say if I had a magic wand, I would fix it and make it, you know, a lot different, but the Board of Education is a lot more focused on oversight. So, you know, as we think about something that I'm in favor of is creating an actual attendance policy, we have a regulation, but where's the policy layering into that policy. There are other difference between the regulation Uh, regulation is the way that something gets carried out so for example, we have IKA, which is the grading policy, which says grading MCPS aims to blah blah blah blah blah. We want blah blah blah outcome the regulation says, you know, you have to give 50% for an assignment that has an attempt the regulation says no assignment can count for more than 25% of a quarter grade.

[00:09:53] Sunil Dasgupta: And so in terms of attendance, what is the difference between policy and regulations?

[00:10:01] Sam Ross: Right now we only have an attendance regulation which states, here are the excused absences, here are the unexcused absences. If you are not in school for 10 consecutive days, you are withdrawn, blah blah blah. What I would I want to shift to is keeping that regulation, but at the same time having a policy which says, here are the factors which

MCPS believes are important for creating and editing this regulation in the future that can include, you know, student participation in extracurricular activities, um, care and thought about, you know, the family and parent situation. Um, instilling the importance of school and the importance for students' future wishes.

[00:10:41] Sunil Dasgupta: Is it the case that, you know, good students that care about being in school still don't show up because they can turn in the work at 11:59?

[00:10:50] Sam Ross: I think it's much more a balanced mix between students who are truly fully disengaged, students who truly do not see the value in school students who probably have some deeper lying mental health and probably deeper lying family issues, you know, we hope every single student has a motivation to get up every single day. They have a vision for their future I think, you know, when students don't have that, when students don't see any value that that that is a sign of a deeper mental health issue when they. Just they they don't, they don't see school as important for their future because they don't care about their future. But I think there are also plenty and plenty of high achieving students who are engaged at their school, but, you know, don't show up to a class or two every day because, oh, I can do the work online, or I'd rather, you know, go out or be with my friends or go and get, get my lunch from home or um go do this chore I have to do.

[00:11:45] Sunil Dasgupta: But should we really care about the second group because they're OK. I mean, for them it's a choice and they are able to complete the work, they learn, they do all the things that we want.

[00:11:57] Sam Ross: So why do we care? I mean, I personally, I mean, for me, from Sam Ross, high school student, I don't see a huge problem with it. I do believe in the end it leads to less actual learning Um, I can say that as someone who misses a lot of class and does a lot of assignments on my own through, you know, Google slides, watching YouTube videos or whatever, but at the same time, if we do only want to focus on the first group, if we do only want to focus on the students who truly have um some deep hardships in their life when it comes to those barriers to attendance. We can't still sit here and go, but the attendance rate is so low, like we have such a high because, well, those students are being marked chronically absentee too Um, you know, you can.

[00:12:41] Sunil Dasgupta: So yes, I was gonna ask, are we seeing the attendance rate as something? Other than what it is.

[00:12:48] Sam Ross: Yeah, I think, I think right now, you, you look at the attendance rate and you go, well, that is such a high number. That must mean that we have, you know, a third of students in Montgomery County don't even care about school. They don't want to do anything with their lives, they're on a path that is not what we want them to be on, when in reality it's probably something more along the lines of a smaller group of that 3rd. They are on a worse path, they don't have a strong vision for their life, but a lot of that group does. They just know that they cannot go to school, they can turn the attendance satellite, the, the assignments at a later time, and they'll still be fine. I'm gonna be honest, students don't really care about these instances, right? There, there are some students which, you know, in, in their greater wish for

change in MCPS do care about it, but they also know, I mean I know so many I mean, you can even argue myself. I, I haven't been to my sixth period in such a long time because of all my school visits and my student leadership field trips and this, that and the other, a lot of students, you know, recognize there is an issue with absenteeism in this county. Overall, on the whole, it's not a huge thing students are thinking about, but I do think when adults see it and they go, wow, a third of students in MCPS are chronically absent. They do tend to see it more as 1/3 of students in MCPS don't care about their future and are about to go down a horrible path instead of 1/3 of students on MCPS just not showing up for class every day.

[00:14:13] Sunil Dasgupta: So there you have it, a real substantive difference between what adults see and what students see. We found it. There you have it, right? So it shows that there is a clear difference and if students had a greater say in this, then perhaps the way we look at attendance would change.

[00:14:36] Sam Ross: Uh, I mean, I think so.

[00:14:38] Sunil Dasgupta: What else are you hearing from students about what is important right now to them?

[00:14:43] Sam Ross: Like I said earlier, you're generally gonna get a lot of the same stuff, meals. HVAC maintenance, um, you know, teachers curriculum. What I think is much more pressing and much more at the top of students' minds that they just don't, they don't know how to express maybe is the mental health crisis, is support for mental health. Um, it's a hard truth that I think everyone has to face that school can really, really contribute to some students poor mental health. It can really, really be a negative force in a student's life instead of a positive one when it comes to their mental health and it's such a wide and vast topic that also, the more and more, feels like the more and more we pour into it, we get, the more and more removed from actual from the top priority being teaching and learning. That It it's difficult for everyone to articulate I think it's especially difficult for students to articulate.

[00:15:49] Sunil Dasgupta: So the issue of mental health, student mental health, and actually staff mental health too has been debated on the board of Education since at least 2017. We've been making some investments in social workers, others but we don't seem to be having a clear impact.

[00:16:12] Sam Ross: It affects so many more students than we see, and it affects students even beyond those which are actively in crisis, those which, you know, are actively in any kind of treatment for mental health.

[00:16:26] Sunil Dasgupta: So which tells me that the model that MCPS has been using for at least the last 6 years, perhaps more, of having more social workers, having more counselors. It's perhaps not the model to pursue if there is a finite number of people that are available to talk to students, and the number that, and the number of students they need to talk to is, you know, potentially much larger than they can manage then we ought to think of a different model.

[00:16:56] Sam Ross: I would halfway agree I obviously think we shouldn't, we should just like, I don't think we should just do away with all the staff systems that we have built up over the last few years, but I do believe we need to have a greater emphasis on you know I say this meeting seemss where they are in terms of mental health education right now, a huge issue. With all mental health education, with social emotional learning is that at least for middle and high school students, it doesn't connect you know, students laugh every single time they watch one of those videos.

[00:17:31] Sunil Dasgupta: That's right those assemblies don't work you said this twice now, meeting students where they are. And that's the larger MCPS model even, right? It's meeting students where they are academically meeting students where they are socially, you know, emotionally, etc. um. Is it possible? For a school system to actually live up to that promise. How do you meet every student where they are? It seems to me a gargantuan problem.

[00:18:09] Sam Ross: At least for, you know, the topic of mental health education, I don't mean meeting every single student where they are specifically. I mean, overall, the curriculum, the talking points that we are getting don't connect with students because they aren't. Completely sensitive to their issues, you know, um, we've had some very impactful assemblies about drug use. I think that's a great example of meeting students where they are in terms of bringing in real human people who have real human experiences to talk about instead of, you know, just playing a Google Slide video and calling it a day. Um, for mental health right now, I think there's a huge disconnect between why students are feeling the way that they are, what causes it, um, what that really looks like, and what MCPS is saying, you know.

[00:19:05] Sunil Dasgupta: OK, explain that difference.

[00:19:07] Sam Ross: In my view, what I've heard, the mental health curriculum right now, the social emotional learning curriculum right now is largely written from a perspective that doesn't exist anymore, talking, you know, maybe you're like, here's what you do if your friend looks down and depressed. Reality, every single student feels down and depressed. You know, are you stressed out because of your your family situation or your schoolwork or your job? Every single student right now is generally pretty aware of every single horrible thing going on in the world right now. Students are exposed to so, so much through the internet, through social media, and, and it affects us, um you know, climate anxiety is a huge part of what high schoolers are telling me right now in terms of fear for their future, in terms of anxiety, in terms of hopelessness. Never in my wants, never in my life have I had any kind of lesson or acknowledgment that, um, lesson or presentation which acknowledges that. Overall, we are in the most overwhelming age of our entire history and, you know, school can contribute to that students feel like they're completely overwhelmed by assignments, they're completely overwhelmed by studying, they are completely overwhelmed by everything.

[00:20:26] Sunil Dasgupta: Completely overrun by assignments, completely overrun by study. How do you fix that?

[00:20:31] Sam Ross: We've got to at least try to go back in a small way I often say on some other things, we can never actually go back. I think we can never go back on like phone use in

schools, everyone's always going to have a phone on them for the rest of their life there's only so far we can go back in that on the other hand, let's do assignments on paper. Let's read our books on paper let's um. At least try to go back to having schoolwork done within the classroom, within the school day. Let's try to go back to, you know, not having these excessive notifications, you know, every single second of every single day I'm getting 1000 emails, 1000 canvas notifications about this is great, you need to submit this, this assignment was created, etc. etc. etc. maybe bring it down a little.

[00:21:19] Sunil Dasgupta: Right, so have you talked to teachers about this? I mean, I'm sure they should be on board with this.

[00:21:23] Sam Ross: Um, I can't say I specifically have talked to teachers. I'll tell you right now what I think would tend to be the response. I mean, you can email the new president of MCA he's from my school, Mr. Stein, it's along the lines of, we don't really like it either, but this is what we have to do in order to stay in line with what the county wants. What I want to do is, OK, well then let's make the county want something else let's make the county want assignments to be completed in class, you know, not online. I think right now teachers feel pressured to have this extreme leniency only available by these online platforms, and that's why they're utilizing them to the degree they are.

[00:22:04] Sunil Dasgupta: Right, in some classes, it's possible to have them to have students do the work in class, but in something like physics, for instance, or even, or say calculus BC I'm not sure how you can even you know, pull that off you have to, you teach in class and then you say, go home and do this work.

[00:22:22] Sam Ross: Me personally, when I was in AP physics one my freshman year, our homework assignments were paper and you know, we did them with our calculators. There was no additional layer of, hey, open up your Chromebook, open up Canvas, go to the worksheet, go like watch this video and then do the notes here. And I mean, I definitely agree that that's a balance that has to be struck between different classes and their different demands, um, especially, you know, in the high school level. I guess what I mean in terms of getting the work done in class is you have your assignments that you do in class, you know, my, my modern world history class, we have plenty of class time to complete this assignment, so it's going to be due at the end of class versus, you know, my statistics class, we have the work that we do in class. We have the lecture that we learn in class, we have our homework, you know, take home it on paper and it's, it's not like we're, we're sitting there with an open worksheet from Canvas that we were supposed to do in class, but then I don't feel like doing it, so now I'm just going to go do it at home.

[00:23:31] Sunil Dasgupta: How do you think the board works as a group? Do you think they are, um, receptive to ideas from students.

[00:23:43] Sam Ross: I'd say right now, the current board, generally, I mean, you know, this, they're very united on everything, um, at least to the public, the board almost always does everything unanimously. There are very few times when the board breaks apart in terms of voting, in terms of ideas, in terms of comments, um, you know, I can't speak to the closed

sessions because no one can, but overall, the board tends to work together, and right now that does mean being receptive to students, but that does not mean seeking out students or really for any matter. You know, I hate to say this, right now, the way that the board is built, the way that the board functions means that for the most part, They go to their meetings, they do their readings on occasion they'll maybe go to a visit or something, but other than that. The student member of the board's really the only one going out to all the school visits, who has an advisory council, who um is consistently putting out all these public information updates. And well I hope this shift, we're talking so much about having a full-time board, about having all these major shifts to the Board of Education because they have so much to do is upping the expectation for everybody in terms of seeking out voices instead of just being receptive like I think the board is right now.

[00:25:09] Sunil Dasgupta: Sam Ross, thank you for taking the time. Good luck in the campaign.

[00:25:11] Sam Ross: Thank you.

Credits

[00:25:22] Sunil Dasgupta: That's Montgomery Blair High School junior Samantha Ross, one of the two finalists running for the student member of the Montgomery County Board of Education. You can find her on Instagram at Sam Ross for SMOB - Record of Action. You can find her opponent Praneel Suvarna's interview in the accompanying episode. Please be sure to share both episodes with any MCPS secondary student you might know. Music for this episode comes from Kensington resident Adam Barbara. If you want to share your music on the show or know someone else who might want to, please email us at producer@ihppod.org. I hope you'll listen, like, and share the show as we bring you stories about politics close to you and to your home, see you next time.

Music. .