

ANTONIA WATTS

DISTRICT 2 BOARD OF EDUCATION

By Authority: Friends of Antonia Watts, Korin Sharp, Treasurer



1. Given the budget constraints and the likelihood of no further funding influx, what would you prioritize in special education and how would you go about implementing your ideas?

The highest priority in special education is the addition of special education teachers. They are an important part of the support system for students with disabilities. However, lack of funding makes this increase difficult. It is critical that all other related services like transportation, speech, physical therapy, etc. remain fully intact at the level at which the student requires. To ensure that these services are not diluted, I suggest keeping the number of students served by each service provider at the current level.

Time is almost as valuable as money. Special educators need more time to complete their duties. They should have a period dedicated to case management that is protected time free of meetings, classroom responsibilities, or other duties. Additionally, special educators should be assigned to a specific grade level and if possible, one content area. Often, they serve students across multiple grade levels and multiple subjects. This requires the educator to know the subject matter and the best way to adapt that content to students. This takes an incredible amount of time to accomplish. If they were given the opportunity to focus on a single grade or a single subject, special educators would be able to provide a greater service to students.

Additionally, I want to see a special education strategic plan developed. In the current strategic plan, special education is lumped with general education outcomes. However, I

believe that a supplemental plan should exist for the unique needs of students with disabilities. This plan would hold the school system accountable for creating a highly effective special education program with measurable goals and outcomes. I would advocate for the strategic call to action team to work with key stakeholders in the special education community to develop a standalone plan for special education.

2. **For Incumbents:** What have you done for special education before and during your time as a Board of Education member?

For new candidates: What have you done to learn about and advocate for special education concerns?

To advocate for special education concerns, I gave budget testimony to the County Executive in March of this year to encourage him to include funding for the RECC program in the budget. The RECC program is an inclusion program that combines typical peers with children receiving special education services. Additionally, to support this special education program, we enrolled our child into this program to ensure that his classmates had a typical peer to play and learn with.

As a general education educator, I was often the first advocate for all of my students especially those that I referred to special education services. After students were identified, I worked with the special education teacher to meet the requirements outlined in the IEP or 504 plan. When I taught in a co-teaching environment, I planned lessons alongside the special educator to incorporate both of our ideas.

In my role as a teacher, I recognized the need for additional training in special education. However, at the secondary level, there was not much formal training offered through traditional avenues. So, I often attended “#spedchat” sessions on twitter as part of my professional development. Here, teachers from all over the world joined in the conversation about various special education issues. I learned the processes of other school systems and the tools and techniques used by teachers nationwide to reach their special education students.

When my oldest child needed physical therapy and then speech therapy, I learned how to work with his therapists to encourage his progress at home. It was a new experience, and it exposed me to some of the challenges that parents face.

3. How would you support educators within current fiscal constraints in order to alleviate the rise in behaviors in the school system?

Research supports the inclusion model where students with disabilities are in a general education classroom with their typical performing peers. Students with disabilities spend less time with their special education teachers. This means that general educators, like myself, must have the necessary training to properly support students in the traditional

classroom setting. My teacher education program was ranked in the top 10 in the nation and yet, there was minimal training on how to work with students with different types of disabilities in the classroom or how to work in the co-teaching model. I know that my school was not unique in this regard. In my teacher education program and in my teaching experience, students with disabilities are often left out of the equity conversation. While budget constraints may limit the number of additional special education teachers added, general educators will benefit from additional training on how to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

4. What are your thoughts on students with disabilities being a part of a general education classroom?

I am a big believer in the inclusion model for students with disabilities. With appropriate support in place, they should be a part of the general education classroom. In one of the budget work sessions, the RECC program was discussed. This is an inclusion program that combines typical peers with kids receiving special education services. Bill Barnes, the chief academic officer, was asked about potential cuts to the RECC. He stressed that the inclusion model used by this program was very important to the special education students. The inclusion model is important to the typical peers as well. At 6 months old my oldest son was not moving in the way that he should. He was found to be behind when he was evaluated. He received early intervention services in gross motor and speech which allowed him to catch up to his peers when he was 2.5 years old. Through infants and toddlers, we learned about the RECC program. At 3, my son was in a multiple intensive needs classroom as a typical peer. He learned empathy interacting with his classmates. He understood that different kids have different needs. This is something that some people do not learn until much later in life. The experience was so beneficial to my oldest that we applied to the program for my youngest. This program is vital for our most vulnerable population and mutually beneficial to their peers.

5. Compare and contrast the roles and responsibilities of student achievement liaisons and special education case managers.

The student achievement liaison works with school staff to support the academic, social, and emotional needs of African American/Black or Latinx students. In addition to tracking student achievement and developing cultural programming, the liaisons collaborate with the special education department to conduct parent informational meetings.

The special education case manager is a member of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team and ensures that the services outlined are met in the classroom. This requires case managers to design instruction, collect data to track student achievement, handle all paperwork for the IEP, and communicate with parents and staff.

Both groups aim to improve student outcomes through interventions and advocacy. To achieve this, they work with school staff and parents to develop resources for the students they serve. They monitor student achievement and make adjustments to the material accordingly. Communication skills are important for both roles. Additionally, both serve students that are more often singled out for behavioral problems. There is an intersection of student populations served by the student achievement liaisons and special education case managers. Because of this, they can play complementary roles in ensuring the success of the students that overlap. Also, knowing that Black/African American students are overrepresented in special education, the two groups could work together to identify and remedy the cause of this problem. Additionally, the suspension rate is the highest among students with an IEP followed by African American students in all schools in Howard County. I would love to see the liaison and the case manager develop training for educators to address and reduce this disproportionately high rate.

While both groups are important to the students they serve, the special education case managers oversee the special education processes and verify that IEP services are implemented in compliance with federal, state and district regulations. The case managers face a legal responsibility to the students. There is no such charge for the liaisons. The case manager is a certified special education teacher. However, there is no specific certification requirement for the liaison positions. The two positions may serve the same child, but each serves that child in a way that is unique to their role.

6. Explain your understanding of how HCPSS special education compares to surrounding counties.

Compared to surrounding counties, HCPSS has a smaller percentage of students with disabilities receiving special education services. Those countries spend less per pupil to provide similar services to students with disabilities. In some counties, like Prince George's County, special education teachers get additional pay above their base pay. Other school systems offer differing amounts of resources for parents to understand the process. When my son started receiving special education services, I used the parental information from Anne Arundel County to help me understand the timeline and process.

Like other counties, HCPSS has an overrepresentation of Black/African American students enrolled in special education. This is a problem that needs to be addressed at the local and national level.