



Howard County
Board of Education D3

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?

I would like to work on policy that focuses on school climate with the goal to encourage inclusion and tolerance. This policy would include school-wide training and workshops that are ongoing for all members of the school building community (including bus drivers). By encouraging a school climate where students and educators feel welcome, safe, and needs are met, boundaries that students face can be lessened to allow more educational progress. When students and families feel included they are more willing to attend school and engage in their education. Students that understand and welcome diversity – including disabilities – and tolerance as the culture of their school, are more likely to support their peers rather than bully them and compete with them in ways that are unhealthy. Educators and other adults that interact with the school population will embrace the positive outcomes for their school communities and more easily see a student for their goals and be less influenced by their own past biases or flattened expectations based on presumptions about the students.

2. What have you done to learn about and advocate for special education concerns?

During the last BoE election cycle, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the concerns of the special education community, since I hadn't been personally involved in the HCPSS Special Education process. I attended the SECAC forum for BoE candidates and it helped me to understand the current state of affairs as well as which candidates I could support because they supported the concerns of the community.

To learn and advocate more recently, I have reached out to Special Education Advocates with questions I have had in regards to hiring qualifications, budget questions, as well as information on the procedure/process for getting special education services and staffing questions. I have also had one of my children evaluated for

potential services this past year after some concerns and am working through that process. During OBRC meetings, I have been engaged and carefully listened when SECAC representatives discussed concerns specific to the operating budget and how we can make recommendations to encourage more support of well-trained hires, retaining trained hires and making sure resources are available and delivered as necessary in supporting students and staff.

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

In addition to implementing policy discussed in the answer for Question 1, which will address some alleviation of the rise in behaviors, I have also learned there may be an additional trigger for the rise in behaviors, specific to the special needs community. There may exist a lapse of training and implementing the training across all levels of special education teams and, in turn, the one-on-one actions of support are not always aligned with guidance created through the IEP and 504 process. Efforts to create more accurate training could help match support with IEP and 504 plans more closely and encourage avoiding interactions where ill behavior is an issue. Basically, getting all parties on the same page for each individual IEP and 504 plan and allowing the relationship across the parties to be transparent and honest. When things are not working out for all parties, I would like to see a review and revisit of the plan, an assessment of goals and metrics to identify where the particular lapse is happening and how all parties can be better supported by HCPSS.

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

All classrooms and field trips should be a least restrictive and inclusive environment for every child and supports should be in place to provide a safe and healthy learning environment. Students with disabilities, their families and HCPSS should be part of a transparent process to outline the support the child needs as well as goals the child has. When the learning environment becomes not safe or healthy for students and staff, reassessment needs to occur quickly and then followed up with a transparent process that alters what wasn't working. This process should include identifying and correcting core issues that are causing the difficulty within the classroom. This issue doesn't only consider students with disabilities but every child that impacts a classrooms safe and healthy learning environment.

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

In HCPSS there is a single Special Education Parent Liaison who is tasked with supporting the communication and policy guidance of all families who receive special

education services, as well as some administrative aspects to the role. This role is located at the HCPSS central office. In HCPSS, there are Student Achievement Liaisons at schools to support BSAP, Hispanic, International as well as MESA students. These liaisons support a similar goal as the Special Education Parent Liaison but are specific to supporting students, families, and community members to accelerate academic achievement in demographic groups that are historically seeing achievement gaps. A Special Education Case Manager is the primary facilitator in the process of Special Education Services and works with families and HCPSS to support and align resources and transition students.

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

Howard County and all surrounding Maryland public school systems are required to adhere to the same policies from the federal and state levels. Where they differ is in the implementation of policies, which includes the requirements of hires and the pay/benefits of those hires, e.g., an HCPSS Special Education Paraeducator vs. a MCPS Special Education Paraeducator. The job description and posting of the role is almost identical across the two school systems but there are major differences in the minimum education, training and experience requirements for eligible applicants. In HCPSS, to qualify for the role of Special Education Paraeducator, you must have a high school diploma or equivalent. In MCPS for the same role, the requirements are so much more extensive by contrast. I am including verbatim the education and training requirements to demonstrate just how much more training MCPS Special Education Paraeducator applicant must have to be considered for the job:

- Associates degree, required. Bachelor's degree preferred.

- A minimum of nine credit-hours related to the education field such as behavior management, instructional strategies, and/or one-year experience working with students in structured educational (or academic) situations required.

- Two to four years' experience working with children and adolescents preferred. Or at least 48 college credits and two years of experience in an education related field including preschool, adult day program, after school program, extended day, or school/non-school based departments, etc. Or two years of experience in an education related field including nursery school, adult day program, after school program, extended day, or school/non-school based departments, etc., and

- Successful completion of the ParaPro Assessment with a qualifying score of 455 or higher is required.

- Any combinations of applicable education, training, and experience which provide the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary to perform effectively in the position may be considered.

These are the requirements for the same job position in neighboring counties that follow the same state and federal level laws and requirements. There are huge differences in these applicant requirements ranging from what seems to be a bare minimum to what is very particular. I do not have access to the next step in the hiring process for these two counties. It could be that HCPSS has a very in-depth and explicit training path for new Special Education Paraeducators and MCPS has them jumping right into the classroom, in which case it could be just a preference of hiring good people and training them to be the best staff or it could be a luck of the draw and hire who you can. I would like to research this more to understand this vast difference because from what I have learned, there isn't sufficient training happening to support that theory.