

## **Matt Levine:**

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 believe that special education should be funded as a top priority. In light of the current budget constraints, I would look at the HCPSS budget as a whole and find cuts that don't involve direct interaction with our kids. We need to look at central office spending and at any other spending that doesn't directly affect our students. I would prioritize an evidence-based reading program such as the Orton-Gillingham approach, as well as training for teachers. If we shift to a true phonics-based reading program that works for all students, including those with learning disabilities, this will take some of the pressure off of the special education teachers and allow them to focus on other needs.

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?

As someone with dyslexia, ADD and other learning disabilities I have been involved in special education my entire life. Also, for the last 3 years, I have been fighting to get my kids who both have learning disabilities and ADHD the supports they need to learn and be successful from HCPSS. I use the word "fight" because I know the struggle that parents have to go through just to get their kids basic services. This is one of the main reasons I entered the BOE race. I was sick of hearing folks claim to care about special education and then when it came time to vote they always looked the other way.

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

Our special education teachers need support by hiring trained special education teachers. I do NOT agree with the current push to trade highly trained teachers for low paid contract-based aids that only have a high school diploma. These types of employees are not trained to handle the needs of our special education students and exasperates behavior issues. Our teachers need trained special education support that is invested in the schools and our kids.

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

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that special education students learn in the least restrictive environment, meaning with other students who are not receiving special education. I believe that the only time a student receiving special education should not be in a general education classroom is during the times that they are receiving special services or if they do not benefit from being in the general classroom and if that is what the parents want. We have seen all the studies that show an

inclusive classroom is what is best for the kids. While it may not be the lowest cost, we should never look at that when it comes to supporting our special education students. However, the decision should always be based on the parent's desires.

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

In HCPSS, student achievement liaisons are part of the Student Access and Achievement Program and support school-based acceleration and enrichment programs. For example, the black student achievement program liaisons assist students with meeting identified educational, career, personal, and social competencies. The Hispanic achievement liaisons collaborate with students, staff, families, and community members to accelerate the academic achievement of all Hispanic students. Special education case managers are teachers who are members of the IEP team and are responsible for coordinating instruction and related services. Both positions support student education and provide specialized supports for students that are in need of additional support. However, only special education case managers are assigned to specific students and have the responsibility of ensuring that IEP services are being implemented in compliance with federal, state, and district regulations.

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

Howard County has awesome teachers and even more awesome special education teachers. However, HCPSS fails to support our special education teachers with adequate resources to do their job properly. This was highlighted in December when over 70 special educators filed a union grievance. Further, HCPSS is known for pushing back against parents that request testing for learning disabilities or providing needed supports. This is supported by state wide data showing that Howard County has a lower percentage of students receiving special education services than surrounding counties. Unfortunately, parents must pay for an advocate and fight the school system to get needed support.

HCPSS is also known for waiting until a student is way behind before giving support and needs to stop. It is not fair to our special education students and also ends up costing more in the long run. For example, if dyslexia is supported with evidence-based reading interventions at an early age, it takes way less time to get the student on track than if we wait until the student is behind and struggling. Surrounding counties such as Montgomery County have a much better special education program and have invested in resources such as Orton Gillingham training for teachers. One example is how school systems are implementing special education services during distance learning. Montgomery County is providing services to students over Zoom and is holding 504 meetings. On the other hand, Howard County used special education as an excuse to withhold distance learning from all children and has not rescheduled cancelled 504 (or IEP to my knowledge) meetings or scheduled 504 (or IEP to my knowledge) meetings that have been requested by parents since schools closed.