

Sezin Palmer:

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 prioritize hiring additional trained educators, not untrained aides, and provide training for all educators and staff engaging with children with special needs. The overwhelming feedback from special education experts, teachers and parents, is that proper training is the biggest challenge in minimizing behaviors in the school system and providing an environment conducive to learning. I would go about implementing this by prioritizing educators to receive training based on need; those with the most need would receive training first, and the goal would be to ensure proper training of all educators working with children with special needs over a 3-year period. This would also allow for additional / refresher training for all educators every 3 years.

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?

I have met with experts in special education, special education teachers, and parents/advocates of children with special needs. I have also attended discussions and meetings, such as the Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee, and have reviewed numerous documents regarding special education. In particular, I have reviewed HCPSS policies, parents' complaints, legal filings, and HCPSS responses to parent complaints. I have also reviewed records of HCPSS performance relative to children with special needs, focusing not just on academic outcomes but also statistics on restraint and seclusion as well as suspensions. I have been quite troubled by what I have learned through all of the above discussions and documents, and I believe addressing the challenges students, parents and teachers face in special education is one of the top priorities that must be addressed by HCPSS immediately.

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

I would support educators by providing them with proper training to ensure they have the resources they need to be successful in dealing with and preventing behaviors. As with all fiscal decision-making in a funding-constrained environment, it always comes down to priorities. My priorities as a BOE member would be laser focused on ensuring children have the resources they need to ensure successful educational outcomes. This would come at the expense of unnecessary administration costs and other non-educational costs for programs and positions that have been put in place in recent years that have not been demonstrated to improve educational outcomes.

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

I think students with disabilities, just like every other student, should be in the settings that allow them to be most successful. For students with disabilities, this has been shown to be best accomplished in general education classrooms. In order to be successful, however, those educators and staff engaging with students with disabilities must be properly trained and given resources to provide the level of engagement and support necessary for success in the classroom.

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

Student achievement liaisons are primarily focused on advocating for students' academic success and are specifically charged with "accelerating the academic achievement" of those students aligned with their areas of responsibility as well as increasing awareness of and educating students about the student population for which they are an advocate.

Key differences between these roles and those of special education case managers is that the case managers are simply focused on ensuring compliance with IEPs and acting as a point of contact or facilitator between the school and parents. Student achievement liaisons take a proactive approach to advocate for students for whom they are responsible to ensure their success, while special education case managers focus on ensuring the bare minimum is being provided to the student. Children with special needs must also be supported proactively to ensure they reach their full potential; merely providing the bare minimum support is not what a top-ranked school system should aspire to and is not something parents in Howard County should accept. In addition, educating the school community and student body regarding special needs and disabilities should also be a part of the special education case manager's responsibilities.

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

HCPSS has a reputation as one of the best school systems for children with special needs, however, this reputation has not translated to supporting the educational needs of children with disabilities. While Howard County has historically been one of the best,

funding decisions over the past several years have resulted in a decline in the quality of educational services provided to children with special needs. A primary area of concern is the lack of specialized training for special educators in Howard County. While class sizes continue to increase and the ratio of students to teachers increases, this further exacerbates the challenges for children with special needs as well as the educators and staff responsible for teaching them. There are many examples where surrounding counties are taking measures that exceed those of HCPSS. One example includes Baltimore County, where they have provided the gold standard training for special education - Orton Gillingham - to over 800 special educators over the past several years. Howard County continues to put untrained aides in classrooms, working with children with special needs. This is one fundamental problem with the HCPSS special education system; there are a significant number of untrained staff interacting with students, which results in significantly more behaviors in classrooms than necessary.

Another comparison is with Montgomery County, where the growth in the number of trained educators has tracked linearly with the growth of the special needs population. In Howard County, however, a very different and unhealthy picture is presented: Howard County employs more untrained aides with lower requirements for those aides than surrounding counties. In Howard County, there are hundreds more untrained student aides than certified educators working with children with special needs. In Montgomery County, by contrast, there are hundreds more certified special educators than untrained aides. In fact, almost every other county in Maryland has significantly more special education teachers than untrained aides.