

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.

It has become clear that a significant portion of the issues plaguing our classrooms have their roots in the failure of the school system to maintain appropriate staffing levels, with experienced, credentialed, and qualified educators and support staff - especially in the Special Education Department. Our students needing special education services, accommodations, and ancillary services are not having their needs, nor their already limited service hours, met in too many cases.

The first step in addressing these issues is to accurately evaluate the number and type of staff members needed to appropriately service the students in each classroom, school, and the school system. We cannot even begin to put a legitimate price tag on the costs until we identify what we actually need.

The IEP process under IDEA lays out the legal requirements that must be met, but HCPSS continues to push the envelope with staffing ratios, how it assigns educators with various credentials, and in the end has a current system (pre-covid) on the verge of total breakdown because of excessive case loads, inadequate support and inadequate training.

It is critical for HCPSS and the community to understand that when students with disabilities or challenges are in classrooms where their teachers do not have adequate support, have not been provided with specific instruction on how to, for example, deescalate behaviors before a meltdown occurs - then the entire student body is impacted. Appropriate staffing, training, and qualified support staff are not luxuries that apply only to students receiving special education services. They are critical for the effective operations of each classroom, and the maintenance of a healthy learning environment.

I will lobby the Board and Administration to bring the TEs back in house, and take control over the hiring and training of more highly qualified individuals and provide them with proper and effective training to meet the needs of the students they will be assisting.

The current covid crisis has turned everything, especially for our most vulnerable students, on its head. As the system is put back together, and plans are made for how to reopen schools, the HCPSS Administration - at the direction and insistence of the Board - should start with each individual student being evaluated for how they best thrive. What have we learned these past months for each student? Do they thrive with distance learning with supports, small groups, inclusive classrooms, early in the day, later in the day.... so that when HCPSS designs its new instructional delivery system, the needs of individual children can be taken into consideration, and new and innovative classroom structures, blended environments with distance and hands on opportunities; new structures around a new framework born of the need for social distancing, flexibility, and multiple options, can be developed and implemented. There may well be significant opportunities to cost shift, and develop more effective and efficient delivery models customized for individual students. HCPSS is going to have to reevaluate the deployment of existing staff, and carefully evaluate what new or repurposed staff can do to provide the learning environments most likely to succeed. Sometimes it take a crisis to break the inertia that tends to develop in bureaucracies. I am hoping this is one of those times.

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 believe I can answer as both a former member, and a new candidate. I began my service with HCPSS as a parent of a child on the autism spectrum who was scared, and trying hard to learn as much as I could to provide my son with his best possible chances for a full and rich life. 10 years of IEP Meetings, doctor visits, evaluations, therapies, and lots and lots of patience with him, us, the system, and the fates, led me from working for my own child to helping others who were having difficulties managing the process and getting what they needed for their students. People would come to me with questions about how I got various services and accommodations for my child. I helped them figure out how to get services and accommodations for their students. But not always successfully, which was very frustrating. It is one of the main reasons I originally ran for the Board of Education. I discovered many parents were not having the same experience our family was.

As a Board Member I fought to add more staff, including special education teachers, qualified support staff, providers of other professional services, and the Special Education liaison/ombudsman. I was pushing for an in house parent advocacy group that would be available to parents to help them navigate the system. We finally got the single liaison/ombudsman who is supposed to assist parents. I am not personally happy with how that role has developed and how well it is working on behalf of our families. I believe we need a stronger parent assistance model.

I fought the cuts that were made, including the cuts made surreptitiously when funding earmarked for special education was simply not spent, then included in the categorical transfers at the end of the year. The dire financial situation has become an excuse not to properly staff and train our educators and their support staff. The Board needs to take firm action that protects, and expands special education staff and service providers so we can meet our obligations both legally and as a function of the community's commitment to ALL of our children.

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

When this question was originally written, did it include the new fiscal and operational environment we are in right now, and likely will be for the foreseeable future? Behaviors in the classroom take on a new meaning right now. That said, it remains critical that the educators and support staff who work with our children - all of them but especially our children with special needs or accommodations - are adequate in number and proficient in the necessary skills to see frustrations and behaviors building, redirect or diffuse as necessary, and maintain the learning environment for that student and all the rest in the class.

The rise in behaviors can be directly tied to the reductions in properly trained and adequately numbered staff. HCPSS has currently developed a system of chronic overtaxing of the classroom teachers, the special educators, the support staff, and the children which lead directly to behaviors, frustrations, time

lost to behavior management after it has escalated, and time and learning lost to the students who have experienced these “meltdowns” or interruptions. It is a classic example of penny wise and pound foolish.

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

Of course the Law is “least restrictive environment”. We should start from there. For my child, I wanted him in a regular school among typically developing peers. We knew that with adequate support, that would be the best thing for him, and help him overcome his social issues while his intellectual abilities would be appropriately stimulated and developed. The key was “with adequate support”. I believe for most of our students with challenges, disabilities, and special needs, the best place for them is a properly staffed general education classroom. However, it is not appropriate for every student, or for many students all of the time during their school days. The HCPSS has to have and utilize the flexibility to find the right setting for each student, and the right balance. But, again, “with adequate support” is the key. At some point in the past couple of decades some bean counter in a central office or department of education seems to have had an epiphany. “Specialized education classes are expensive... so let’s just put all the special education students in regular classrooms. Think of all the money we’ll save!” That needs to stop. Each child deserves an IEP that identifies his or her strengths and weaknesses, and develops a program for that child that maximizes his or her potential - executed by educators with the skill, support, resources, and TIME to satisfy their needs. And when that child has a disability or challenge, then it is the Law that those needs be identified and met. It goes beyond our legal obligation that HCPSS not strive to get by with the minimum possible. ALL of the children deserve a classroom environment they can thrive in. That requires adequate and appropriate student to educator ratios, based on the individual needs of the students in every individual classroom.

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

Special Education Case Managers are responsible for evaluating, designing, overseeing the execution and monitoring progress of the IEP and 504s, and ensuring compliance in the processes. They play a specific role in the fulfillment and compliance of IDEA. They are a legal requirement for this regulated process.

Student Achievement Liaisons are the school system’s separate investment in closing gaps in the classroom/teacher and student/family connection. We have liaisons for many of our immigrant communities, as well as some of our other struggling student groups. We have the Hispanic Student Liaisons, working with our students and their families to bridge the communication gaps and assist with navigating the various school and community assistance programs. We have the Black Student Achievement Liaisons who are tasked with working with African American students and families to help

them navigate the school system so the students can maximize the impact HCPSS programs and offerings can have. We also have a Special Education Parent Liaison who is tasked with helping parents and families navigate the special education system. These are all positions that attempt to create and maintain a relationship between home and school for the benefit of the child.

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

As a result of a philosophy of a previous administration, HCPSS began what was claimed to be a rebalancing of credentialed special education teachers and special education aides. The original notion presented was that students should have qualified teachers in from of them, and not just a body in the form of an aide. And yet, all the actions taken under that administration reduced the ratio of qualified teachers to students while also reducing aides and other support staff. Special education has pretty much been sideways since the infamous DMC Report suggestions and recommendations were put into place in fractured pieces. This was generally the justification for the execution of a routing of the Special Education department.

HoCo has one of the lowest percentages of students with IEPs in Maryland. As a parent of a student who had an IEP throughout elementary and middle school, I can attest to the unrelenting pressure from certain staff members to remove it. During his high school years we did finally agree to move to a 504 plan for basic accommodations. The argument constantly made was that the goal was to make him more and more independent. But it was clear the efforts to make him more independent could go forward while the protections and requirements of the IEP were in place, and the real goal was to reduce the accountability and oversight legally required by the IEP. Other counties with IEP ratios more in line with national averages do not appear to be as focused on removing students from the special education rolls.

Some analyses insist HoCo spends more on Special Education than surrounding counties, with poorer results. The argument being that HCPSS is not using its available funding in effective and efficient ways. While there is always room for improvement and reevaluation of existing programming, it has been my sense that the systematic decimation of the previously existing solid foundation of special education programs and services has led to deminimus efforts that ultimately waste time and resources with little to show for it, or worse. The conclusion some draw is that HCPSS has adequate, if poorly distributed, resources. I disagree. I would draw an analogy that if a ditch digger is too poorly funded to purchase a proper shovel, and is forced to try to dig a ditch using cheap plastic disposable shovels, he will ultimately break and waste a lot of plastic, and make precious little progress on the ditch. The waste will not be cured by further reducing funding to buy more plastic shovels. It will be cured by providing adequate funding to purchase a proper shovel so the effort expended will produce results.

The key to education, and special education, is appropriate and properly trained educators in sufficient numbers, executing thoughtfully developed education plans designed to meet the needs of individual children. There are no shortcuts. Howard County, and much of the country, has been on a mission to streamline design and delivery of education as if it is desirable, or even possible, to create an education assembly line to pump out identical student products, at the lowest possible cost.