



2022 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education

Overall / Funding Priorities

1. From your research and knowledge thus far, what do you believe are the most pressing current issues in HCPSS special education?

I believe the most pressing current issue is staffing special education and providing the funding. I understand that special educators need more planning time and better trained support staff (para-educators).

2. What experience do you have as parents, professionals or advocates working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regards to advocacy for students with disabilities?

As a parent, it was difficult to get the support needed for one of my sons who had learning needs that were not obvious. I had to go outside the system and pay out of pocket to find out what his challenge was. Since he didn't have an obvious learning difference, he was not considered to have needs. As an educator, I have worked with students with varying challenges (disabilities). I recognize from a general educator's perspective the challenge of getting the support needed by teachers, students, and families to support students who have special needs to facilitate their learning.

What sets me apart from the other candidates is that I am an educator, a dyslexic, and understand the challenges of navigating the world differently. Having educated my three children who were all born prematurely (one with a special need), living as a dyslexic, being a trained educator, supporting and being a facilitator for the TALK WITH ME birth to three engagement initiative, my following the work of the Restraint and Seclusion Workgroup through which Dr. Jeannie-Marie Leoutsakos introduced the the Ukeru method to HCPSS as an alternative to restraint and seclusion, as well as my community advocacy, set me apart from the other candidates.

3. Across the board, teachers are leaving the profession, and it's particularly acute for special education staff. How can we successfully hire and retain sufficient staff in special education?

The HCPSS system of hiring seems to have issues across the board with processing applicants in a timely manner as well as providing competitive salaries at every step of educators' experience. Teachers of many disciplines have been hired by other school systems who offer better compensation and are more responsive in processing applicants well ahead of the HCPSS. Offering support for housing and other benefits alongside competitive salaries may also help as less than 50 % of HCPSS educators live in the county.

Beyond the hiring issues there is a need for more time for special educators to plan and collaborate with their peers as well as with general educators. One idea suggested to me for the elementary school level is to make elementary leaders non-instructional leaders. Also, there must be a pipeline developed to encourage young people and career changers to be special educators.

4. The COVID19 Pandemic left lingering mental health issues across the student body, especially among the special education population. How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

We have a mental health crisis in this country that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic and inflamed by political divisions that have ramped up in recent years. It is incumbent on all adults to understand the impact that both these have had on all of us, especially children and even more so children in the special education population. Therefore, there must be special efforts to support, educate and inform educators, students, families, and the greater community regarding the social-emotional needs of children especially in these challenging times. Even more so, there must be support provided to address the special mental health needs of students, especially students in the special education population.

We need specially trained staff (psychologists, social workers, and counselors) to be available to provide specific mental health support for students with special education needs. Extra financial resources for hiring mental health personnel and for training, planning, and incorporating techniques and methods infused in teaching informed by the understanding of the social-emotional needs of children and staff are fundamental. Prioritizing and funding mental health staff is critical in order to get students through these emotionally charged times.

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future provides funding for additional behavioral health professionals at an increasing rate through 2027. Finding outside money through grants should be sought out and applied for to bring on additional mental health staff throughout the school system. However, there are currently not enough mental health workers to meet the needs, the reality is that we all must do all that we can individually and collectively to make sure that all children are well. This means training the greater community to recognize and support the mental health needs of all children. Partnering with local agencies and nonprofits may provide some support.

As a member of the BOE, I will advocate for funding, training, and support for mental health workers, trained staff, and school-wide training on meeting the social-emotional and other mental health needs of children.

Compliance

5. Many families have not yet received pandemic-related compensatory education services to which they are entitled. What should HCPSS be doing to speed up and ensure that special education students receive appropriate pandemic-related compensatory education services?

The issue of HCPSS students not receiving pandemic-related compensatory education services may be a result of a lack of available staff as well as families' lack of knowledge of how to receive outside pandemic-related compensatory services. I understand that staffing for compensatory education services is through a volunteer system. There need to be other steps taken to encourage special educators to sign on as volunteers. Person-to-person recruitment comes to mind.

Also, there may be unintended barriers in place which can be addressed by gathering suggestions and responding from special educators who are willing to provide ideas for ways to improve the process. Parents may be unaware that they can seek outside services that are reimbursed by the county. The reimbursement process may be a hindrance to low wealth families which is also an equity issue. Better communication and guidance is needed.

6. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language are entitled to have a translator at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their language. We are hearing from parents that this is a barrier to their participation in IEP meetings. As a board member, how would you ensure that all parents are able to meaningfully participate in their children's IEP meetings?

Having a language barrier makes it more challenging with participating in IEP meetings. However, I understand that obtaining an interpreter was less challenging when the IEP was done virtually. Providing clearer guidelines may help families as well as educators. Providing more support with the process for newer educators may also help. As a board member, accountability is my priority and that is what I plan to do to help ensure that all parents are able to meaningfully participate in their children's IEP meetings. This means meeting with and listening to those parents from schools throughout the county and following through on uplifting their concerns.

Inclusion

7. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being the most inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their peers in their home schools. Research has shown that inclusion of students with disabilities benefits ALL students—those with disabilities and those without – when it is implemented appropriately and when the necessary supports and services are in place. Please share your view on inclusive education—whether you support it or believe it is challenged in Howard County—and any personal experience you may have with inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom. As a board member, would you support inclusive education and, if so, how might you strengthen inclusive education?

I fully support inclusive classrooms. There must be the necessary resources, collaborative planning, and behavioral support provided to ensure that the students can effectively participate in classroom activities.

When I taught sixth grade, I was fortunate to work with an amazing special educator who co-planned with me. We were able to modify materials to meet the needs of our students so that all of the students were able to genuinely participate in the lesson activities. Being able to work with an excellent special educator showed me what well planned inclusive lessons can offer all students.

As a board member I will support inclusive education. To strengthen inclusive education, there must be the necessary staffing and resources provided. I will also support providing alternative pathways for those interested in becoming special educators so that there can be a better pipeline to meet the need for more special educators.

Discipline / behavior

9. What alternatives to physical restraint and seclusion should HCPSS be training its staff to employ, particularly now that HB1255 has banned seclusion and requires reporting and corrective action plans for overuse of restraint?

HCPSS implemented a pilot program using an alternative method to restraint and seclusion called Ukeru. Since Ukeru has been shown to be effective, it would be reasonable to provide the training for all staff in schools where Ukeru will be used as suggested by Dr. Jeannie-Marie S. Leoutsakos in response to HCPSS 6/21/2022 report on their Ukeru Pilot Program. In the long term, funding for training and materials should be provided system-wide so all students and staff can benefit from the Ukeru approach.

10. Students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined, suspended, and physically restrained. The school system is increasing restorative practices to address this. Do you believe this is the correct course of action? If so, why; if not, what would you do differently?

I support restorative practices recognizing that restorative practices indicate that there is something that needs to be restored. Therefore, developing good relationships with students is a must. When a relationship is broken or interrupted then restorative practices are necessary in order to move forward.

Helping educators to better understand how to develop good rapport with students from different backgrounds and experiences is critical in a school system with diversity of all kinds. Incorporating restorative practices to address issues of discipline is a good tool but it must be used in concert with addressing the social-emotional needs of students before restoration is needed.

11. Lack of appropriate behavioral supports and accommodations can be a major barrier for students with disabilities to access the general education classroom. What suggestions do you have to better support these students in general education?

I suggest better communication and more time for collaboration between special and general educators to meet the behavioral supports and accommodations needed for students . Also, it is necessary to have better communication with families of students with disabilities before issues arise. In other words, be proactive to understand the needs of students.

Another issue is coordination. Better coordinating the transition of students to their next grade level between special and general educators can go a long way to help receiving educators to anticipate students' behavioral needs.

12. What provisions should be included in our MOU with HCPD to ensure the safety of special education students, including students who are nonspeaking and/or may behave in ways that police officers could misinterpret? (this leads them to an answer)

Having HCPD receive ongoing training in Ukeru practices would be helpful in assisting police officers with their interactions with students who may be non-speaking and/or behave in ways that could be misinterpreted.

Special Education Programs and Issues

13. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read will not be successful in other academic areas. Roughly 63% of students without disabilities and 91% of students with disabilities are not meeting grade level standards on the 2021 3rd grade ELA MCAP. As a Board member, how can you work to improve reading outcomes for all students, particularly those with disabilities?

Working to improve reading outcomes is personal for me. As a dyslexic, I struggled to read without any support during my time as a student in elementary, middle, and high school, as well as in undergraduate school. I know how important learning to read is. With the new push to use the "Science of Reading"(SoR) method of teaching reading, those statistics can be turned around. However, not all teachers are ready and prepared to be effective in using the SoR method to teach reading which incorporates the use of phonics and phonemic manipulation. Training of current educators and future educators in the SoR is absolutely critical to address the dismal results in reading proficiency.

As a Board member, I will advocate for the necessary funding and training of educators in the SoR. Families need support as well to know how to help their students learn to read, therefore reading proficiency must be a whole community effort.

14. The Ready to Read Act has regulated that the school board set the schedule for screening students for reading skill deficits. It is best practice and the recommendation of the DIBELS screener to screen all students 3 x year. What would be your plan to ensure the efficient screening of all elementary students K-5?

With all that educators face as a result of the disruption in learning due to COVID, additional staff will be needed to ensure efficient screening of all elementary students

K - 5. Perhaps offering incentives to retired educators and other trained members of the community to fill the role of screeners can be considered.

15. Many students are experiencing busing issues, but they often affect the special education community more acutely because students with disabilities who are provided specialized transportation often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may be nonspeaking. (From the calls I receive, the concern is less about a child being left—I'm not sure I have ever heard of a child being dropped off without an adult visibly "receiving" them. The concerns are: delays in pickup, and a nonspeaking child being hurt on the bus and not being able to communicate that. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

Finding bus drivers and support staff is a nationwide issue. There is a need for creative thinking to address this lack of sufficient staff to provide reliable transport of the most vulnerable students. HCPSS must hire and train more bus staff. It may be time for HCPSS to consider owning and operating its own bus system.

HCPSS must also provide better communication, training, and time for bus staff and school staff to ensure the safe and reliable transportation for all students. There must be clear and timely communications with families, bus and school staff to make this all work.