



September 15, 2022

Dear BOE Candidates:

Greetings! The Howard County Autism Society and Howard County SECAC are excited about the upcoming Thursday October 13th Special Education Board of Education candidate forum. Thanks so much for accepting our invitation. As a reminder this forum will be virtual and commence at 7pm. Full details can be found at <https://howard-autism.org/event/howard-county-board-of-education-candidate-forum/>

In advance of the forum, we are sending you the following candidate questionnaire. We would appreciate it if you return it to us by Friday October 8th, 2022. We will post full, unedited written responses on our websites.

We will ask a selection of these questions during the candidate forum. Note, we have given community members the opportunity to ask additional questions in writing in advance of the forum. Time allowing, we may pose some of these questions off as well.

Feel free to reach out to Jeannie-Marie Leoutsakos (idreamofjeannie@gmail.com) with any clarifications about these questions.

Thanks again for your participation in this event,

Andrew Stettner, Vice President Howard County Autism Society

Supreet Anand, Co-chair Howard County SECAC

Stephanie Mummert, Co-chair Howard County SECAC



2022 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education



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Better Education for All, Vote for Chen!

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?

Special education is facing many challenges, including insufficient staffing, training, and funding. Besides hiring an additional 186.8 special education teacher positions budgeted for in FY23 and many supporting positions, the most pressing issue is to train the newly filled 160+ HCPSS special education staff members.

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?

I played a leading role in implementing the Howard County Chinese School (HCCS) Horizon Foundation 2021 grant and helped establish the youth ambassador program and organized the BranchOut Howard County Chapter. The grant team focused on mental health and suicide prevention and has partnered with Howard County Autism Society to provide a peer-centered, high quality tutoring program to HCAS students.

As a parent of three children attending all three levels of HCPSS and as a scout leader, I have witnessed the challenges of students with disabilities at schools and scout events. During my campaign, I have also met with school psychologists, ALS teachers, OT, PT in special education and listened to their concerns. Due to the complex and wide spectrum of special education needs, I will continue to listen to and learn from parents, professionals, and advocates in the special education area.

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?

I know many teachers find teaching a fulfilling profession. However, teachers do not receive enough support, enough assistance, or enough training, and there are too many layers of bureaucracy. We need to offer competitive salaries and hire more paraeducators for special education to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for students and a safe working environment for staff. We need to evaluate all demands on educator's time outside the classroom and evaluate the necessity of all paperwork, eliminating all requirements not mandated by state and federal laws. This will allow teachers the ability to focus their time and effort on students who need them most.

In addition, it has been reported numerous times that HR hiring is very slow and discourages new hires. We need to improve the hiring process and set up procedures to hire staff in their senior year of college.

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?

The pandemic made us realize the importance of in-person learning and prioritizing the social emotional needs of students. It is critical for schools and families to focus on minimizing screen time and social media usage. We should encourage more in-person learning environments and promote social interactions among students. The school system needs more mental health counselors and they need to teach students to do mental health self checks and encourage them to seek support as needed. I will work to continue funding for additional mental health professionals to work with both students and families. I would like to pursue agreements with our Health Department to support student and family mental health.

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?**

Learning loss is a big problem and special education suffered most due to the more severe staff shortage. Compensatory education is an equitable remedy designed to repair educational and functional deficits which may have resulted from a denial of FAPE. HCPSS should allocate sufficient funding and staffing to pandemic-related compensatory education services. When the staff shortage in education is relieved, HCPSS should speed up staff training. The quality of learning depends on the quality of special education staff and we must have a sufficient number of adequately trained staff members in special education in order to be able to provide compensatory services in a timely manner. In the interim, HCPSS can look into reimbursing families who are willing to find their own resources out of the school system to cover the compensatory education services students deserve.

- 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?**

Immigrant families do receive less attention in special education services due to the language barrier. Step one is to hire more staff who can speak their languages because the translation of complicated terms is not easy at IEP meetings. Step two is to train translators in the special education terminology, procedures, laws, and HCPSS policies.

HCPSS can help special education parents by developing a video series in different languages that explains HCPSS policies and procedures, screenings, the IEP process, and the available resources. HCPSS could also help facilitate meet-ups between special education parents that speak the same language. It takes a village in any language to help raise healthy, happy children.

Many immigrant families face language barriers and do not know the resources available to them. For example, dyslexia is hard to detect in immigrant families as English is not their first language. We need to reach out to these families to inform them of available resources and encourage them to ask for help. Additional screening may be needed for early identification and prevention.

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 agree that the 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. In reality, many classes do not have enough support and services, leading to disruptive environments in which all students suffer, especially students with disabilities who may be traumatized by certain incidents. Therefore, if I am sitting on the BOE I will be pushing for additional trained staff (educators and paraeducators) to ensure the school system can implement inclusion safely for the benefit of all.

- 8. Recent test scores and reports indicate that the achievement gap for those receiving special education services is not improving. What specific changes could be made to improve achievement for special education students?**

No. 1 is to prioritize in-person learning and keep classroom instruction running as smoothly as possible. The quality of instruction will determine the outcome of students. Teachers should spend more time on instruction than crisis management and, therefore, need adequate support. We should seek feedback from special education teachers and equip teachers with ample support and training. I cannot emphasize enough that we need to listen to the teachers in the classroom. We also need to listen to the parents of special education students.

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?**

Seclusion should have never been used and physical restraints should only be used in the rare instances that harm will come to the student or someone else, with the restraint being removed as soon as possible. The key is to have appropriately trained

staff and to reduce class sizes. Teachers and staff can not truly understand a student and their needs when they are trying to take care of the differing needs of so many students at once. Having the training to see the signs that a student will need more support is the first requirement, while the second is to have the available staff and the available protective resources (e.g., Ukeru pads, etc.) on hand to support the child in crisis.

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 believe restorative practices do a better job than punitive approaches to discipline. The restorative practices can dramatically improve the school climate and strengthen the social and emotional skills of students. Restorative approaches address the underlying reasons for students' hurtful behavior and nurture their intrinsic desire to treat others with care and respect. The reality is some special education students will not understand why they are being punished, removed or disciplined. Having good communication with parents, having available counselors, and having an IEP for each student that is actually followed should be the norm.

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?

In order to better support students with disabilities in general education, I would suggest smaller classrooms, more paraeducators, better training, and additional support staff for any crisis intervention. In order to provide this we must scrub the budget for waste and ineffective programs and put money in the classroom.

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)

The MOU should include yearly to bi-yearly training on dealing with children with disabilities and especially children who are nonspeaking. This training is needed not only by SROs, but all police officers who may respond to a school issue, a child on the street while not in school, or a nonspeaking adult in our community. For those schools that have SROs, they should be part of the Special Education team meetings so that they can become familiar with the Special Education population at the school and each students' individual needs. Having the SRO participate in team meetings and school activities with students gives both the student and SRO an opportunity to become familiar with each other and build trust.

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?**

First, we need to take preventative measures through the use of screenings at a very early age and continue those screenings throughout elementary school and at least once in middle and high school. Besides screening, the teacher and parent communication is critical here and listening to what a parent observes in the home and what a teacher observes in a classroom is crucial to identifying children with reading and comprehension differences. Kindergarten through 3rd grade is the most important period for students to develop reading habits and it is crucial that we have small classrooms with strong supports to ensure every child learns to read to the best of their ability during this time. While we can not mandate what goes on in the home, I believe a quality education should not neglect providing training and resources for parents. Encouraging parents to read to their children, encouraging them to limit screen time, and encouraging them to get their children outside into the physical world should be a priority for HCPSS. HCPSS should work closely with the Howard County Health Department to help with screenings and with the Howard County Library to promote more reading programs after school and during the summer. We also need to reach out to immigrant families and low-income families to encourage reading and create awareness of various programs using the parents' language.

- 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?**

There are many ways to conduct the screening. People must be trained to do this and I would first look to our retired teacher community to try to build a cadre of screeners that can help with this task. As screening can be time consuming but does not require active participation from all students at once, alternate learning opportunities (e.g., outside time or assemblies) should be considered during the days screening is conducted. I think working with the PTAs and other nonprofits to support alternative learning while screening is being conducted would be worth pursuing.

- 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**

non-speaking 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?

This is difficult because there is such a shortage of bus drivers and buses. Optimization software might be the first step to determine how we can get our more vulnerable students to their destination safely and with minimal time on a bus. Second, we have to train the attendants on the bus as well. They should know how to effectively and safely deal with nonspeaking children. In addition to using smaller and specialized buses or shuttles for those students who need it, we should explore new technologies to keep parents informed. For example, parents and drivers could have more direct and effective communication using a mobile APP during transportation thereby allowing parents to get timely updates and avoiding any miscommunication due to any delay or emergency event.