



September 15, 2022

Dear BOE Candidates:

Greetings! The Howard County Autism Society and Howard County SECAC are excited about the upcoming Thursday October 13<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup>, 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](mailto: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

### 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?

Based on my research and knowledge gleaned from educators and parents, the most pressing issue with special education today is having enough trained staff to support all special education students 100% of the time. Funding to hire more trained special educators, mental health professionals, paras, and student assistants must be a priority. Additionally, we need to give staff the time they need to properly document student performance and adjust individual plans as needed. The paperwork alone is a big job. The caseloads are overwhelming. Without proper support personnel, our special education teachers cannot continue to do the professional job they aspire to do. The loss of teachers has been recognized for what it is, an impossible situation.

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 have two grown sons who attended HCPSS. One of which had a 504. Even then, it was difficult to get this in place. At this time, we are left with an emergency push to hire enough staff to provide proper support for special education. I have learned from students about the disruptions in their classroom because of the large class size and the lack of necessary oversight of the special education students. The teachers are placed in impossible situations to manage the large number of students. I will advocate for sufficient support personnel for teachers to ensure an optimum learning environment. I will also advocate for the use of structured literacy to teach reading. Using 2019 data, the whole language method of teaching reading results in low proficiency rates. 45-50% of 3rd grade students are not proficient in reading. 63-72% of Black/Hispanics are not proficient in reading. This must change. There is a proven method of reaching and teaching all students at a very early age how to become proficient at reading so they can move from learning to read - to reading to learn.

I am meeting regularly with members of the education side and parent side of special education to be informed. I will continue my work to be best informed on matters in special education to best serve the community.

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?

Teachers go into education to make a difference in the lives of children. Our special education teachers are not feeling personal success due to the high demands of the job and increased needs of students. They are stretched too thin. We need to fully fund special education so staff are not burned out. We need to address their concerns and work with them to find solutions. I believe the BOE and Central Office need to meet with Special Educators and offer opportunities for them to speak freely without fear of retaliation. Additionally, special education teachers are reporting bodily harm and injuries caused by students. This is a real problem and results in teachers leaving the profession for equal paying jobs outside of education where they do not have to risk their physical safety.

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?

This year many schools received additional mental health staff to handle the increased mental health issues. However, teachers are our first line of defense since they are the ones who know students the best. Teachers are most likely the ones who will be referring students to counselors, psychologists, and social workers. They need to have proper training and ongoing relationships with those in the mental health field so no child in need goes without notice.

### **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?

It is unacceptable that our most vulnerable students have been waiting for compensatory education services. If the county were to hire more special educators, they would be able to offer more services. The county should also investigate ways to offer services beyond the school day such as tutoring services or weekend academic clinics. This glaring statistic is reflective of the thin service that HCPSS can provide at this time.

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?

All parents should be able to participate in their children's IEP meetings and educational decisions. The Superintendent needs to be charged with the responsibility by the Board Members to obtain translators for IEP meetings with a timeline for success.

### **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 would agree, inclusion of students with disabilities benefits all children. I believe Howard County has prioritized inclusion and I support inclusion as best practice if implemented properly. This can be challenging when schools are short staffed, and students are in classrooms with only one educator, especially if that educator is not a special educator. I have heard from teachers that students who need close adult supervision are doing without at different points of their academic day. I would work to hire more trained staff so Special Education students are receiving proper support all day to ensure success in all subjects. Additionally, I would work to reduce class sizes so that teachers are able to offer more individual instruction as needed.

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?

Student achievement is very concerning. I have heard from parents who have chosen to withdraw their students to enroll in private schools even if it means forfeiting special education services. Parents are finding that smaller class sizes are increasing academic success at a better rate than they experienced in public school with an IEP. I believe the entire student population would benefit from smaller class sizes. As a BOE member I would advocate for smaller class sizes so teachers can offer more individual attention.

### **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?

Teachers are expressing concerns about not receiving sufficient alternatives to restraint and seclusion. I am told of incidents of students in crisis that are handled by informal lockdowns. This is not a plan. Students can be traumatized by witnessing such an outburst and being locked in their rooms. Training for response and/or de escalation of these situations must come from professionals. As a BOE member, I would advocate for alternative training or additional support to avoid these stressful situations that are so difficult and emotional for all parties. We need to ensure all students are receiving an education in a safe learning environment and lockdowns caused by peers are not a suitable solution.

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?

HCPSS has a Student Code of Conduct that specifically outlines responses to policy violations. From my research, school principals are given great leeway to respond to policy violations with leniency due to IEP/504/Special Ed. status. HCPSS Superintendent has stated the school system is using restorative practices to address behavior for all students. I believe this practice can be effective for our special education students to address disproportionate disciplinary actions if teachers are properly trained in those practices and actively using the strategies within their classroom. Additionally, restorative practices should be included in students' Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP), so they are knowingly working towards those goals that are within the framework of HCPSS Student Code of Conduct. As a system we need to make sure we are setting our students up for success when they leave the school and enter the public square.

11. Lack of appropriate behavioral support 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?

It is abundantly clear that adequate support needed for the programs to be effective is not there. Advocacy for more robust staffing is essential. It also seems like the culture is one that may at times place a positive appearance on issues like this one, knowing the results are sub par. This is a disservice to the students and teachers and this needs to change.

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)

SROs should work in tandem with administrators by a method of introduction to the special education community so they can respond accordingly. SROs can and should be able to

identify Special Ed. students prior to incidents and know of their unique requirements should they need assistance in a crisis situation.

### **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?

I have stated previously that I am a proponent of the Structured Literacy method of teaching reading to all students. This very foundational approach with consistent universal screening of students 3 times per year can identify very early, a student who needs additional support in reading. The testing takes 4-6 minutes per student. For unknown reasons, this method of teaching reading is not widely accepted as the preferred method in HCPSS. It is my understanding that teaching colleges do not teach this method and they should. Delaying this method of teaching our students to read is simply compounding discipline and learning issues as students move on and do not achieve grade level reading skills. Classroom teachers, special educators, reading specialists, speech language pathologists should all be trained in structured literacy.

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? See #13.

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?

Redistricting changes have an inordinate impact on Special Education students. Consistency of teachers and surroundings are important for their success. I would advocate for special education students not to be redistricted further from their initial school setting. Buses that transport Special Education students should have cameras and a student to assist Special Education students during the bus if possible.

