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2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education Dr. Andre Gao

Overall / Funding Priorities

1. From your research and knowledge thus far, what do you believe are the most pressing current issues in regard to HCPSS special education services?
I believe we should enhance the capability of HCPSS special education services so that we do not need to outsource to private entities. If we cannot provide such services to our students and need to send them to private special schools, that can be costly to HCPSS and inconvenient for the families.
2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?
The outcome of the review should provide us the recommendations on how can we improve and meet the needs of our students effectively and efficiently.
3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?
As a parent of three children, I can understand and feel what the parents of special education children experience. I had a neighbor with special education child before. We talked frequently about the situation she was facing. What set me apart from other candidates regard to advocacy for students with disabilities are dedication, persistent, and the ability to find the ways to solve the problems. That is the reason I was promoted to the manager position at my company.
4. 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?
We should recruit in the schools and universities with special education specialty and at the professional conferences. We need to provide competitive compensation and give supports to the teachers that we hire. We should help them to resolve any issue that they have, provide them with continuing training and professional development.
5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body.
How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?



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We should train the teachers on how to spot students with mental issues, and follow the experts advice on how to help and teach students with mental health issues.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

We need find out the reasons behind the missed service hours and insufficient supports. If the resources are the reason, then we should allocate more resources to the education of students with disabilities.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

We should recruit more capable interpreters to help parents for whom English is not their primary language.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

I believe there is no one size fits all on this topic. It works for some students but not for all students. I have heard from both parents and educators their experiences about this program. It is worthwhile to try. We also need to continuously evaluate the success and failures, learn from it, and make it better.



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9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?
I will be open minded, listen to experts and learn from the school systems that had success on this topic. We should also learn from our school system's past experiences, continue to do things that helped and not to do things that proven to be problematic.

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?
We should learn from experts, staffs who work with students with mental health issues, and parents on the alternatives to physical restraint.
11. Lack of appropriate behavioral supports and accommodations can be a major barrier for students with disabilities to access the general education classroom. What system-wide suggestions do you have to better support these students in general education?
We should provide appropriate behavioral supports and accommodations to the students with disabilities to access the general education classroom when such arrangement is beneficial to all students involved.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?
There is no lack of teachers in HCPSS who have been doing well to improve reading outcomes of students. We should learn from these teachers, let them to tell us how, and have them to be team leaders.
13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?
If this approach is proven to work well at screening of reading skill deficit, then we should do it. I would ask HCPSS to implement it.



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14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

We should have background checks for the bus drivers to ensure the safety of our students. Bus drivers should be able to show up at work and first stop on time. Those who cannot be on time should not be our bus drivers. Then the schedules should be set realistically. If it is impossible to complete the route within the scheduled time, then the bus schedules should be adjusted.



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2024 Candidate Questionnaire

Special Education

Catherine Carter

Overall / Funding Priorities

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

I am concerned that we are not able to hire enough special education teachers to meet the current need and have reduced the number of supporting staff due to budget cuts.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

The review should address how to recruit and retain special education teachers, look at mentorship programs for special education teachers, work with current special education staff on best practices, and training for general education teachers.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

I am a former English and ESL teacher, small business owner, and education advocate. I began my advocacy, advocating for my son Atticus, who was diagnosed with double vision, to get the vision accommodations he needed to learn. As a nonpartisan advocate who has worked across the aisle, I have successfully passed multiple bills and programs to solve complicated problems facing our students and community. I have worked with Congress to support soldiers with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), the Atticus Act, Screening Reporting Bill, to changing state and national education policy for visually disabled children through a state and national memorandum, and safeguarding Maryland doctors treating Lyme disease are some of my work. I have always worked to improve our schools and community. My successful advocacy can be found on my website: <https://carter4schoolboard.com>

4. 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?

As a former teacher, my mentorship program when I first began teaching was key to me learning class management skills and wanting to stay in the profession. Funding time for mentorship and collaboration for our all our teachers is key.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body.



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How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

For 2024, I am championed the Lifesavers School Program bill. This program gives students and staff the opportunity to be trained in first aid/CPR and mental wellness/peer mentorship and can help address the physical and mental health needs in our schools. Staff can use their professional development hours, and students can use their community service hours to learn these lifesaving skills. Students will be empowered to save each other in emergency situations like during student lead sporting practices or help the friend who comes to them, is struggling, and needs to be connected to resources and supports.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

I have heard this issue from parents. I will advocate for a review of missed service hours and see how will can ensure we have the resources and staff to fully this legal obligation.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

As a former ESL teacher and a parent of students with IEPs, I understand the importance of ensuring these family have the language accommodations they need to navigate the IEP process. When I was project manager for the Howard County 2020 eye exam outreach program, we worked the make sure we have translators for our parents.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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—



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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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

As someone who has directly benefited from inclusive education, I wholeheartedly support its expansion in Howard County. My son's progress in an inclusive pre-kindergarten class, despite initial struggles, speaks volumes about its effectiveness. Additionally, I've witnessed beautiful friendships and empathy develop among children with disabilities and their peers in various settings, including our church and high school's inclusive events.

As a board member, I would prioritize:

1. Advocating for increased resources and support for inclusive education.
2. Providing ongoing professional development for educators on inclusive practices.
3. Building collaborative partnerships with community organizations to enrich inclusive initiatives.
4. Regularly seeking feedback and reviewing practices to ensure inclusivity remains a top priority.

These efforts can build upon Howard County's inclusive reputation, creating a more supportive and enriching educational experience for all students.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

1. **Research and Analysis:** Conduct in-depth research on successful inclusive education models in other school districts across the country.

2. **Professional Development:** Prioritize professional development programs for HCPSS educators. Include training on evidence-based strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Trauma-Informed Practices, which have shown positive outcomes for students with autism and EBDs.

3. **Individualized Support Plans:** Learn from schools that excel in creating effective Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) tailored to students' unique needs.

4. **Resource Allocation:** Study how successful districts allocate resources for specialized staff, assistive technology, and therapeutic interventions. Explore having dedicated teams of behavior specialists, speech therapists, and occupational therapists integrated into inclusive classrooms to support students with autism and EBDs.



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5. Promoting Inclusion: Look into initiatives from districts like Seattle Public Schools (SPS), known for promoting a culture of inclusion through peer mentoring programs, social-emotional learning curricula, and inclusive extracurricular activities that benefit all students, including those with disabilities. https://www.seattleschools.org/departments/special_education

By leveraging insights and best practices from these exemplary school districts, HCPSS can develop a targeted and evidence-based approach to supporting autistic students and those with EBDs in inclusive settings, ensuring their academic and social-emotional success.

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

As a Howard County School Board candidate, I advocate for proactive and positive approaches to behavior management that prioritize student safety and well-being. Alternatives to physical restraint include implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks, providing comprehensive training in conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques, conducting thorough Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and developing individualized Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), promoting trauma-informed practices, fostering peer support programs, collaborating with mental health professionals, and engaging parents and the community in discussions on positive behavior strategies. These measures not only comply with legal mandates but also create a nurturing and inclusive school environment conducive to student success.

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

To better support students with disabilities in general education classrooms across Howard County schools, I propose a system-wide approach focused on comprehensive educator training in behavior management and differentiated instruction. Encouraging collaborative teams involving general and special education staff to develop effective strategies and accommodations is crucial, alongside promoting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles for inclusive classrooms. Implementing school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks, ensuring equitable access to specialized services, fostering parent engagement, and establishing continuous monitoring and improvement systems will



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collectively enhance the support system for these students, facilitating their success in the general education setting.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?

As someone with a child who has dyslexia, I understand the importance of effective literacy programs firsthand. After years of hard work, my child benefited greatly from a phonic-based HCPSS literacy program, a stark improvement from previously less effective reading programs. Building on this experience, I advocate for evidence-based early literacy programs, ongoing teacher development, personalized interventions using data analytics, increased access to literacy specialists, collaborative reading events with families and the community, diverse reading materials, and strategic partnerships. These efforts create a supportive environment where all students can excel in reading, setting a strong foundation for academic success across subjects.

13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

Ensuring recommended screening of all K-5 students for reading skill deficits aligns with the Ready to Read Act and best practices. My plan would involve several key steps: first, collaborate with educators and administrators to look at aligning with the DIBELS recommendation of three times per year. Next, allocate resources to train staff on effective screening procedures and data analysis. Utilize technology for efficient data collection and monitoring, enabling timely interventions based on screening results. Communicate with parents to highlight the importance of screenings and engage them as partners in supporting students' literacy development. To avoid over-testing and overburdening teachers, we should maximize efficiency by addressing two needs together by integrating screenings into existing assessments or activities where possible, maximizing efficiency while prioritizing student needs. Lastly,



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regularly assess and adjust the screening process based on feedback and data analysis to ensure its effectiveness in identifying and addressing reading skill deficits promptly.

14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

Even with \$50+ million dollars from the county added to our budget, we are only halfway there because of the buses. The school board is asking for the seemingly impossible in a national bus driver shortage. They thought by outsourcing the administrative bus responsibilities to a contractor that they could get the seemingly impossible when that just doubled the costs and caused us to lose our special education buses, leading to increased class sizes and budget deficit that the county leadership had to make up. As a small business owner for a cybersecurity company, I have seen this in defense contracts all the time. Over Spring Break 17 bus drivers quit and more want to. As a school board member, I will work to reduce our transportation costs, which have more than doubled (2021 \$31 million to 2025 \$67 to \$71.7 million). I will also work to support and build back our local community bus companies and ensure we have experienced bus drivers to transport our students.

To ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students, such as those with disabilities, HCPSS should prioritize specialized training for bus personnel in disability awareness and behavior management. Implementing Individualized Transportation Plans (ITPs) tailored to each student's needs, fostering open communication between parents, school staff, and bus personnel, monitoring routes and personnel closely, collaborating with relevant agencies and experts, utilizing technology for tracking and communication, and conducting regular evaluations for continuous improvement are essential steps. These measures collectively work to enhance safety, address concerns promptly, and provide a supportive and reliable transportation experience for all students.



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2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education

From: Trent Kittleman
Candidate, Howard County Board of Education,
District 5

Overall / Funding Priorities

1. From your research and knowledge thus far, what do you believe are the most pressing current issues in regard to HCPSS special education services?
 - Placement of students with disabilities for their separate classroom education frequently puts the wrong students together, limiting their ability to achieve real learning.
 - Insufficient or untrained staffing
 - Failure to provide every special education paraeducator with a Chromebook or other device that would enable them to access the information necessary to handle much of the paperwork that impedes the time teachers have to teach.
 - When the members of the IEP team agree that a private placement is the right choice for a student, there is often no space in the private facilities.
 - The Regional program continues to be problematic. Even with the protective mats provided, teachers continue to suffer injuries, especially since (1) not every teacher in a school with a Regional Program is trained, and (2) there are a limited number of the mats, and they are not always near enough for the special educators when an incident arises. Moreover, many of those in the special education community feel that this program does not educate the students and can even make their situation worse.
 - The IEP program continues to have issues when parents and staff do not agree on the recommendations. In addition, the IEP program requires a lot of time from and a lot of paperwork for the teachers.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

This effort should be more than a review; it should be a thorough examination of the program involving representatives of all stakeholder – particularly parents – with an eye toward a complete overhaul of the system. One of the goals must be finding a way to create a better system of delivery with a reduced budget. Looking ahead to the future, it seems fairly clear that budgets for HCPSS as well as the rest of the County are going to be



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tight, so we should be proactive in preparing for that future. Another goal would be to reduce the paperwork. Most important, I believe, is to listen to what the special education teachers identify as their biggest issues – the ones that are causing so many to leave. Finally, having created and presided over at least two large, significant, and successful stakeholder efforts, what I found to be most important is ensuring that direct communication takes place between teachers, parents, and administrators, and focuses on the details, not just the generalities.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?
- My first experience with disability was my father, who walked with a crutch and cane his whole life after returning from the war. He was a successful entrepreneur – and golfer. I never thought about him as “disabled” (or, in the vernacular of the time, “crippled”).
 - When I graduated from law school in 1991 and went to work for a large D.C. law firm, one of my first assignments was to become an expert on the just-passed Americans with Disabilities Act, and to educate our clients on their responsibilities.
 - My most significant experience working on behalf of individuals with disabilities came when I was Deputy Secretary of Transportation in 2005. At that time, our Paratransit service was managing to pick up our most severely disabled residents *on time* only 75% of the time, and the Department of Justice was a week away from filing a lawsuit against MDOT. I asked for and took on the responsibility of fixing this! By the end of the year, our Paratransit system averaged around a 95% on-time pick-up, and we satisfied the U.S. DOJ such that they never did file the lawsuit.
 - As a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, I advocated for the disabled, supporting and sponsoring various bills. One bill that I sponsored at the request of one of my constituents (Cat Carter) was focused on students whose vision was impaired in a way that was not found in ordinary screening. After a fight in the House, we were able to get that bill passed (called the “Addison Act” after Cat’s son who suffered from this condition).
 - As a member of the Howard County General Assembly Delegation, I was strongly in support of, and voted every year to shift the “burden of proof” from parents to the school system. This effort was to help parents who were dissatisfied with their child’s IEP whose only recourse was to file a lawsuit which was beyond the price range of most parents. The bill never passed, unfortunately.
 - Finally, I have two grandchildren in the Howard County School system who have 504 plans, and I have gained a real insight from their experiences.



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4. 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? It should be one of the most important goals of the "review" of special ed that is being planned. I think it's important to hear from the teachers – and paraeducators – why they consider leaving, rather than making assumptions. A first step would be to reinstate the practice of including the HR Office in the Exit Interviews that are done in the schools, so that they can do a better job of interviewing applicants.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body.
How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?
HCPSS needs to (and is planning to) do an in-depth analysis of its budget structure and application. Currently, HCPSS employs (approximately) 196 School Counselors, 86 Psychologists, 29 social workers, 69 health assistants, 85 nurses, and 8 school mental health technicians. While many of these healthcare positions are direct support for special education, these health care specialists to be able to offer necessary mental health services to students in need of these services. The in-depth analysis of how the dollars for health care resources will be allocated should include a process for parental requests to the school and school requests to the parents to initiate these services, as well as a determination of exactly what the schools' role will be.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

In any situation where HCPSS has a clear policy directive, whether the directive comes from the Federal, State or local governments or is written into the HCPSS Policies and it isn't being followed, the Board needs to find a way to hold the Superintendent responsible for complying.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy.



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Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

As noted above, In any situation where HCPSS has a clear policy directive, whether the directive comes from the Federal, State or local governments or is written into the HCPSS Policies and it isn't being followed, the Board needs to find a way to hold the Superintendent responsible for complying.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

I've served as a judge for the 5th grade Simulated Congressional Hearings program for the past 13 years, judging at approximately six schools each year. I have noticed and experienced a real sense of delight that the participants on the team support each other, regardless of how well any team member can communicate. When there is a special education student on the team, I've seen their teammates provide support in different ways, but always in a way that was respectful. It is clear to me that when children – particularly elementary school students -- are raised around and go to school with children who are different from them, there is a natural acceptance of each other unless and until the adults get involved believing they must force acceptance.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

I wish I had a good answer to this question and am hoping the critical review of the Special Education system will result in finding some answers. The one thing that does come to mind is the value of having a one-on-one student intern or volunteer parent available to students who are having a difficult time in the classroom. When such a person is not available, teachers are at a serious disadvantage in trying to assist one child while teaching the entire classroom, and this isn't a good situation for the teacher or the student suffering from social-emotional issues. With the budget so tight, I'd like to see a concerted effort to recruit more parents (and grandparents) to serve in that capacity.



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Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

This is another very difficult challenge. HCPSS has borrowed some ideas from other school systems such as the Ukeru mats that are used in the Regional Program, and although they do help to protect teachers during a crisis, they are not always available where needed, and, generally, only the special education teachers are trained in their use. I believe this is another one of the issues that should be reviewed with the thoughts and opinions of the teachers being taken very seriously.

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

- One-on-one support available in the classroom
- Better basic training of in-school staff members regarding students with special needs
- Sufficient availability, training, and use of the technology that allows a non-verbal student to actually “speak” through its use.
- Provide Chromebooks or other devices to special education paraeducators so that they can call up information about the students’ IEP plans, in order to allow them to better serve the needs of the student.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?

I am very encouraged by the direction in which our new State Superintendent of Education is taking with respect to reading. Having come from Mississippi where she ‘spearheaded a stunning rise in the state’s historically low literacy rates,’ using “the science of reading,” a form of instruction based on neuroscience and phonics. The State Board of Education is so enthusiastic about the efforts of Ms. Wright that it has set a goal to catapult Maryland into the top 10 states in terms of reading proficiency by 2027.



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13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

Like other issues mentioned, screening each K-5th grade student three times a year is a requirement written into the HCPSS procedures, but not always followed. Whether three times a year is necessary for every child or not is not a useful inquiry since the law requires that it be done.

14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

Providing safe and efficient transportation to school is a must. Although no system of checks and balances will be 100% free from mishaps, the system should have a specific and reasonable goal that it monitors regularly. If a driver is involved in more than one incident (or if the driver is guilty of molesting a child) that person should be terminated. The Board can make it clear that it will not tolerate specialize transportation providers mistreating the students they transport and that there will be immediate and consistently applied consequences for any such incident. Then the Board must follow through!

Jolene Mosley

1. There are many challenges that make it hard to ensure students with disabilities have access to an equitable and inclusive education within general education and special education spaces. I believe the most pressing current issue in HCPSS Special Education is the amount of trained and retained staff available to provide services to the students. This lack of trained staff impacts the time a student is identified for special education services all the way to how the student experiences their access to education. Hiring, training and retaining staff is imperative to supporting students receiving special education services.

2. The Special Education Comprehensive Reviews ultimate outcome is a robust Special Education Strategic plan. The review should account for all current compliance requirements, evaluate program effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, review resource allocation, review students' access and inclusion as well as stakeholder collaboration. The Strategic Plan would then be able to provide specific guidance on researched best practices, goals towards change, accountable measures, Student outcomes in a clearly communicated and continually monitored plan.

3. I have current personal experience with having a child with disabilities that require an IEP to access their education. My child also has a need for outside of school services and tutoring to work towards their goals and access their education. I have hired an educational consultant to help with the process as well as to learn about the IEP process and special education. I am very thankful to be included in SECAC as a board member rep but also as a parent.

4. I am thankful for the feedback that Special Educators and stakeholder groups provide to me as a board member. I have learned so many ways the current policies, budget, safety, current and past practices, training, turnover and staffing impact not only the Special Educators but everyone within the space they are working and learning in. Many times the topic of hiring and retaining sufficient staff in special education has been the center discussion and the reflected solution is that the system should budget, hire, train and also provide more flexibility in employment to grow and maintain a staff that can provide the support students are needing. When the board has budget and policy conversations, I always work towards having an understanding on how the decisions will impact Special Education in hope that by refining a better impact for special education.

5. Mental Health across the student body has been a concern that has only increased since the time I joined the board. Over that time, the world has experienced many challenges that have impacted students and adults in various ways. I believe that having smaller class sizes and training for educators in recognizing mental health challenges in order to refer students to trained mental health professionals, can go a long way. Practices that give access to mental health professionals that can do regular check ins, screening, surveys, observations and communication with students and their families can help identify supports for individual students. These changes would require professional development as well as collaboration with mental health providers.

6. The school system has experienced a historical lack in special education staffing through the recruiting, training and retaining staff. This combined with the legal obligation to meet student supports and hours in IEP's has driven up expenditures in compensatory services and even alternative transportation vendors. By not having the staffing levels needed to support special education, services may cost more and delays may be created in identifying student support needs. Providing proactive and preventative measures are harder for the current staff to maintain with high caseloads. I believe the Special Education Comprehensive Review leading to a Strategic plan will clearly define accountability measures and policy changes necessary to be in compliance with legal obligations to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities.

7. In Maryland, schools are required to provide interpreters to ensure that parents can fully participate in IEP meetings and understand about their child's education. Schools are required to notify parents in advance so that they can provide the translation service. The translator should not only be fluent in English and the requested language but should also have an understanding of the special education process and terminology. If this skill is lacking then they may not be able to fully translate important information and the parents may have trouble advocating for their child's educational needs and for better educational outcomes.

8. I believe inclusive education is very important for every student in the school system. However, inclusion doesn't mean just having everyone in the same educational space. It means having a school environment and culture that is inclusively supporting every student's needs. This requires planning, training and a proactive approach to be successful. A proactive approach may mean that a change to the HCPSS typical classroom needs to happen to allow different models based on the students in the space. Co-teaching, training of every educator will be instrumental in managing these changes in a proactive manner. I believe that every student can learn, should be around peers and should be supported to access their education in ways that may not be a typical method. We need to bring in evidence-based practices, training and flexibility to have a truly inclusive classroom.

9. I believe we need to take a real authentic look at the practices happening and outcomes in regards to Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders in our schools and classrooms. The answer to number 8 is part of this investment in students so that they can have access to their education.

10. The county has invested in Ukeru and other de-escalation training and has implemented these strategies in some schools and should adopt them across the county. This will require training and practice to change the culture away from using physical restraint outside of emergency situations when there is imminent physical harm. Using restraint is not behavior interventions and seclusion has been banned. Reporting of restraint should be prompt and complete.

11. Throughout the answers on the survey there is a common thread of the need for more investment in training and supporting staff to drive a change in culture of the models/evidence based practices that are used for students in special education as well as in general education classroom settings. This investment will help in retaining staff and work towards better meeting students' needs. Together, students will have their needs met in proactive ways and have access to their education.

12. Currently the board has been holding the Superintendent accountable for reading outcomes (along with other student based educational outcomes marks, for every student) using evidence based (Science of Reading) practices to reform the way reading is trained and taught to students. These methods use a multisensory approach or even alternative approaches to teach reading to all sorts of learners. By committing to approaches and supporting educators learning these approaches, the goal is for improved reading outcomes for every student that are also seen to make improvements in other areas of their education and lives.

13. I believe that the school system should be following the manufacturer's normed screening practices and recommendations for the DIBELS screener. I would make sure that the funding is included in the budget and review the reports to the board to make sure that the student counts are reflected of the enrolled counts.

14. The bus situation of this past school year was really an issue. It impacted every student in the school system, even walkers, when the school times were changed after the school year began. I understand how difficult it is for routines and schedules to change, especially when they are unexpected. The bus situation caused some students to change their schedule many times just due to how they were being picked up. I thought it was flexible thinking when vans were introduced to help solve the transportation concerns but the routes could be considered for modifications to limit the time students spend on the bus.



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2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education

Antonia Watts

Overall / Funding Priorities

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

The most pressing issue is staffing followed closely by staff training.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

The goal of the review should be an evaluation of how hcpsd delivers special education services and whether that delivery model is effective for student learning and well-being. From this review, I hope to gain insight into the structure of the special education department as well as how to provide more robust services to students.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

As a parent, both of my children received special education services through the infants and toddlers program. My oldest child went on to be a peer in the Learning Together Program. Now, as a board member, I was responsible for the creation of program administrators who handle the special education paperwork for schools to alleviate some of the paperwork burden that our educators expressed needing help managing. These positions allow special education staff to spend more time focusing on student needs. These positions were developed after I spent numerous hours talking to teachers about their needs. I saw an out of the box solution and was able to secure the required funding to put it in place. Currently, I am advocating for the utilization of less temporary staff and more full-time positions.

4. 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?

One of the things that has to be done is to make the profession more attractive through decreased workload and increased pay. I also continue to raise workload with the special



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education central office Encouraging them to allocate caseloads based on student needs rather than student counts.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body. How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

The first step in monitoring students mental health is to provide training staff and students on recognizing the signs of mental health issues and how to support individuals in need. This training should define clear protocols for responding to mental health crises at school. Additionally, all students need access to routine mental health screenings. Once those needs are realized, then it is important that there are services in place including counseling and community services that are easily accessible to students.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

As a board member, I have been raising the issue of accountability more and more. And doing so I worked to create a superintendent evaluation where students with disabilities and their academic achievement was measurable. In the past, without this data it is difficult to ensure that hcpss is meeting the needs of students.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

I too have not heard that this has been an issue. However, the school system could always use more interpreters. I believe the library system would be a fantastic partner as they have a program that teaches community members English with the aid of interpreters. Additionally,



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because of the limited number of interpreters in the system, parents who need this service may experience longer wait times than their counterparts.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

I'm a firm believer in inclusion as long as the supports are in place to make the environment accessible to the student. As I mentioned above, my oldest child served as a typical peer in a MINC classroom. It made him a more empathetic and compassionate child. This was a classroom of 10 students with five adults supporting the needs of the students. As students move from pre-k into kindergarten, the class size grows exponentially while the supports remain the same or the supports decline as the primary teacher is at times, identified as the person "providing close adult supervision". This is difficult for the student, the staff member, and the classmates. It is apparent that staffing support is critical to support and strengthen an inclusive education.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

This is one area that I am hopeful the special education review will allow a HCPSS to get better insight on how to support students with autism and EBDs. Teachers have expressed that they feel ill equipped to proactively handle student behavioral needs and how to reactively respond to the behavior when it does arise. I anticipate there will be some reevaluation of the training that staff members receive.

Discipline / behavior



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10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

Staff will need more training in proactive approaches, like environmental modifications and increased communication supports, to reduce triggers. Additionally, there needs to be more staff training in de-escalation techniques to effectively respond to and manage crisis situations without the need for physical restraint. While all staff are aware of the ban on seclusion, not all are aware of what they can do in its place.

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

Staffing and training continue to be the most important things that HCPSS can do to support students in the general education setting. Additionally, once students with disabilities are achieving the general education classroom, it is important to keep their supports in place so they can continue to thrive.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?

Reading by third grade is one of the board's goals from the superintendent evaluation that is in the School Improvement Plan for the elementary schools. Because of this, the board is starting to receive regular reports on reading outcomes. Additionally, the Board required an ELA strategic plan to provide a five-year outlook with goals aligned to budgetary requests.

13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

The HCPSS board has already put into effect screening each student three times each school year.



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14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

This year, one bus contractor was able to provide tracking software on its buses so parents know where the bus is at all times. The next step in this process is going to be individual student tracking so the parents also have this data of their child successfully getting on the bus and getting off the bus. To attend to the safety of students while riding the bus, it is critical to provide bus personnel with the same deescalation training that staff members receive as well as ensuring that bus personnel understand the individual needs of the students including the restraint systems. Because HCPSS uses contractors, this training needs to be woven into the contract language to require it.

2024 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 regard to HCPSS special education services?

The single largest issue in special education services is the lack of an adequate number of staff. The truth is we do not have the amount of staff necessary to deliver the education and services that would best serve our students who receive special education. This is not just about funding, but also we are not able to hire and retain staff in special education services.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

The goal of the review should be an evaluation of the model of delivery of services and recommendations as to how to better serve our students. I am not convinced that the co-teaching model is the most effective way to educate our students.

Having recently visited a school and seeing firsthand the lack of instruction in the Alternative Life Skills (ALS) program, I know it needs change, so I am hoping this will be the first step in a process to reform our service model and do better by children.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

What sets me apart from other candidates in my district is my background knowledge and personal experience and investment in the programs we have. As a parent, one of my children began receiving special education services at age 18 months. Later, after one of my children began demonstrating difficulties in college, I encountered the morass that is disability testing and diagnosis. And I realized that despite a complex diagnosis of concurrent disabilities, my child had never been considered to receive special education services by HCPSS.

More recently, as a member of the Board, I have continued to expand my understanding of special education. I have gone to Cedar Lane and seen our educators working with our students

with multiple intense needs. I have gone to Homewood and sat and talked with educators, staff, and students about the continued need for programs there. I have been to SECAC meetings to have a better understanding of the concerns of our families. I have talked with special educators throughout many of our schools to better understand what needs must be addressed. I have also participated in many public meetings addressing special education topics. For example, I have participated in multiple disparate discipline sessions and learned about quasi-suspensions of students receiving special education service that are not even being counted among the suspensions (like when a parent is encouraged to come pick up their child because they are "having a bad day").

I can be a more successful advocate because of these experiences. From my early introduction to special education, to my understanding of testing and diagnosis, to my ongoing work as a member of the board, I have a solid foundation in the services available in HCPSS and I am a better advocate because of that exposure and experience.

4. 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 believe successful hiring and retention of sufficient staff in special education will depend on a reform of our special education model in HCPSS. Additionally, we need to pay educators in special education a premium for staying in the role. Our educators need to feel safe and well paid and the Board needs to listen to educators and paraeducators in special education to better understand their needs and fears. When we do that, we can begin to address the gaps and issues.

I have listened to educators and paraeducators talk about the intense physical demands of special education, the low pay for paraeducators, the lack of support from the central office, the paperwork demands, and more. While attending Howard Community College taking a course in the education field, my own daughter would come home and share what she observed in the classrooms of HCPSS as part of this class. All of these conversations combined with observations during multiple school visits have given me an understanding that to successfully hire and retain staff, we must prioritize safety and pay.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body.
How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

There are three critical steps we need to take to stem the behavioral and mental health crisis that our students are facing.

1. Remove cell phones from the hands and pockets of students in our schools. A teacher can either teach or they can police cell phones, but not both. This would dramatically help our students' behavioral and mental health by taking away the distraction, the social competition fostered in social media, and the immediate transmittal of bullying materials.
2. Provision of behavioral and mental health services in the school house. "Youth are 6x more likely to complete mental health treatment in schools than in community settings" (Jaycox et al., 2010, NCSMH, 2019). By providing it in the school setting, we have significantly increased odds for success in treatment of the underlying issue.
3. Provision of social-emotional learning in our schools. Currently, the most significant behavioral problems leading to student discipline are occurring in middle school. To address that, HCPSS has initiated a social-emotional learning pilot in three middle schools. It is seeing significant preliminary reductions in behavioral problems as students learn skills in how to address conflict, how to interact with peers, and how to engage in constructive behaviors. If these results hold, then we need to introduce this to a wider selection of students.

I also believe that we need to pay close attention to the overlap between mental health crises and neurodivergent youth. Our neurodivergent students, like those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often do not get the help they need because of how the neurodivergence is perceived. We need to have staff that can identify mental health challenges and crises of these students as they may present different from a neurotypical youth.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

The Board needs to have oversight of the Superintendent and demand accountability for ensuring that the needs of students are met for students with disabilities. Since the Board does not control the Department of Education, we need to hold the Superintendent accountable for holding his/her staff accountable to being in compliance with our legal obligations for a free appropriate public education (FAPE). It is incumbent on the Board to ask questions in public

about whether or not we are meeting FAPE, to evaluate if the actual spend rate is commensurate with meeting that need, and ask about reliance on compensatory services to meet required hours.

If/when I hear of instances where service hours are being missed, then I report that to the Department of Special Education and the Superintendent concurrently and ask the Superintendent to look into the situation. This way, I am not micromanaging the Superintendent and the day to day operations of the school, but he/she is aware of what is being alleged and allows them to address it.

Another way to prevent problems is to provide robust funding that allows for service hours to be met and supports to be sufficient. For example, when the department of assistive technology was being considered for cuts, I was voted in favor of restoring those positions so that assistive technology provision would continue at current service levels

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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?

As in question #5, the Board must provide oversight of the Superintendent in this area. Additionally, staff need to be aware of the requirements of the law—like the fact that a member of the IEP Team may not translate for the family. So, if an administrator speaks the world language of the family they can translate but only if they are not serving in a role on the IEP team as an administrator. Staff need to be aware of what resources are available to families, how they can access those resources and assist non-English speaking families in setting up translators and communicating clearly with all parties the time, place, and structure of the meetings.

As well, it would be incredibly beneficial if the staff is up to date on Maryland HB 903/SB 797 Education—Access to Attorneys, Advodates, and Consultants for Special Education Program and Fund and be able to refer families to this type of representation since the Burden of Proof legislation has not passed in the Maryland State House.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

My experience with inclusion in the classroom has been robust. When my own children were young and I was volunteering in the classrooms, all of my children’s primary classrooms were inclusive. Sometimes there were students in the Alternative Life Skills (ALS) programs sitting side by side with my own children and other peers. At other times, students were receiving services or support within the classroom having nothing to do with the ALS program. I worked with students 1:1 in support of their reading comprehension and goals, not knowing if this was a student who also received special education services or simply a normative peer as we strove for reading fluency.

At times, I have seen the failure of the education of our students because of performative inclusion where a student with disabilities was sitting alongside nondisabled peers but not receiving the instruction or support of instruction in a way that they could access their education.

One of the ways that HCPSS historically has not been inclusive is through our teaching of reading. We did not provide instruction within the classroom for phonics and phonemic awareness, critical components of teaching a dyslexic to read. By moving to the Science of Reading, providing LETRS training to all early elementary educators, and providing Orton-Gillingham training to more classroom based educators, we have begun to enhance first instruction for more inclusive learning.

Twice exceptional children (2E), when a student has both a disability and the ability for accelerated work traditionally done in the GT classroom, is the canonical example of where inclusion should happen and needs to happen more robustly for our students. I would like to see and would support a GT model for talent spotting 2E students developed and implemented in HCPSS.

Children with disabilities, especially children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other social disorders, often face social exclusion at play area locations due to physical and societal barriers. If staff are intentional the classroom can be made more inclusive (and comfortable) to provide alternative seating options, reducing direct light, minimizing distracting noises, supporting transitions, providing help with organizing, and learning from the learner about the learner. As a Board member, we need to make sure that policies, programmatic offerings, and

funding allow for these types of inclusion to facilitate learning for students with ASD and other social disorders.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

This goes back to the answer for question #2. The review of special education needs to include an examination of how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs. If this can be built in, then a consultant can bring best practices from other school systems and recommend their implementation in HCPSS.

But inclusion does not have to be that hard. Inclusion is at its fundamental level about offering the same activities to everyone, while providing support and services to accommodate people's differences. Students with ASD and EBDs just need supports and services in the classroom. We can "push in" to classrooms with supports for emotional regulation, with assistance to teachers to better understand the needs of students and the skills required to assist students with social-emotional regulation and coping, with teaching non-disabled peers how to model social behavior to include and engage all students. This is as much about helping adults change our behavior to foster inclusion as it is about children dealing with their social-emotional issues.

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

There is not a one size fits all alternative to physical restraint. Instead, educators should be provided with multiple tools in their toolbox to attempt to help students who are in danger of hurting themselves or others. Ukeru is a viable choice for some students. Other non-physical de-escalation techniques are viable choices for other students.

Having personally experienced an unexpected medical restraint that sent me into fight/flight/freeze mode, I can sympathize with our students who do not comprehend situations and react inappropriately. Our educators and staff need training to respond in developmentally appropriate ways that will not trigger fight/flight/freeze responses in children. And in cases where those responses are triggered, they need to know next steps to help students understand why their brains and bodies are responding in that particular way.

More importantly, when a student has behaved in ways that might warrant physical restraint for their own and others protection, a root cause analysis needs to be done to determine if there was an identifiable trigger or underlying cause. If there is a pattern of disruptive behavior that might lead to physical restraint, staff need to examine if they could have prevented or halted the escalation.

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

The range of supports and accommodations should be cataloged, explained, and distributed to all staff working with students with disabilities. Every educator should know about flash passes, about calming rooms or spaces, about adaptive devices available, about de-escalation techniques and more. By sharing with our educators about the array of supports, training, programs, and offerings to build their toolkit, then educators can be aware of and know how to access them when they encounter a student who would benefit from its application.

I spoke with a special educator today that stepped down from teaching to become a paraeducator because she did not feel as though she could do the job. When she went to another school to become a paraeducator, she learned about a myriad of supports available for her to use with the students who received special education. She lamented that she wished she had known what was available and it would have made teaching easier and more effective. The students would have benefitted if she had not been left alone to flounder. The school system needs to do a better job effectively communicating to those in the classroom what is available so that teachers and paraeducators can deliver the supports.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?

HCPSS needs to implement the Science of Reading with fidelity. This should include comprehensive instruction for educators in how to teach reading using the science of reading. Phonics and phonemic awareness instruction must be explicit and intentional. Teachers need to be trained in LETRS as well as intervention strategies and systems like Systematic Instruction

Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS), Heggerty, and Orton-Gillingham. Until all educators are appropriately trained and are implementing the pedagogies with fidelity, reading outcomes will not substantially improve. HCPSS needs to be fully committed to structured literacy and move away from balanced literacy. HCPSS should also implement all four forms of reading assessments: universal screeners, diagnostic tests, progress monitoring tools, and summative assessments. I would support all of these goals as a member of the Board and hold the Superintendent responsible for progress in each area.

13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

I would advocate for following the assessment recommendations of the Center on Teaching and Learning, which specify that: "DIBELS is designed to be administered to all students who are learning to read in English and who are physically capable of taking the tests. You would generally only exclude students who are deaf, who stutter, who are completely nonverbal, or who have severe phonological difficulties.

During the benchmark screening of all students, students receiving special education should be administered grade-level materials. When progress monitoring you can use materials at the students' instructional-level if the grade-level materials are too difficult to show response to instruction." (University of Oregon. Available: <https://dibels.uoregon.edu/>).

Additionally, per the above citation, there is a difference between benchmarking the student and using the screener for progress monitoring. Given this difference, it seems that after students meet Benchmark, then using it as a progress monitoring tool may not be necessary if HCPSS is using other developmentally appropriate progress monitoring tools built in jAMPLIFY (K-5), *Being a Reader* (K-2,) or *Into Reading* (3-5).

DIBELS should be continued to be used for all K, all unscreened students, and all students who have not met benchmark and are not receiving reading special education supports and services.

14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students

who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

The Board of Education has contracted for an external review of the transportation system with Prismatic. This review should come back with recommendations for fixing the errors of the past year, for improving the design of the system, and hopefully ways to achieve cost efficiencies in the delivery of services. It is my expectation that this review of our transportation system will yield a set of recommendations and solutions that will allow us to shrink our walk zones and improve our transportation system for all students with on time delivery and safe transit to school. I believe this will benefit students with disabilities for whom transportation is not provided in their IEP.

Additionally, current transportation budget overruns, particularly in the service of students receiving transportation for out of county non-public placement, have resulted in changes for many of these students. We are recompeting the contract for alternative transportation for Students in Transitional Housing and students receiving transportation for out of county placement in non-public facilities. By recompeting the contracts for these services, bringing some of transportation services back under long-term contractors with alternate vehicles, and stabilizing the consistency of providers for these services, it is my expectation that we will have improved the situation for students receiving transportation under the umbrella of special education services.



2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education

Julie Kaplan

Overall / Funding Priorities

1. From your research and knowledge thus far, what do you believe are the most pressing current issues in regard to HCPSS special education services?
 1. **Inadequate Support for Educators:** According to a survey, only 34% of educators feel there is adequate support for special education students. This lack of support can impact the quality of education and services these students receive.
 2. **Budgetary Constraints:** Financial limitations are a significant challenge, affecting the ability to hire sufficient teachers and paraeducators, provide necessary training for paraeducators, and ensure adequate resources are available for all students.
 3. **Increasing Diversity of Needs:** HCPSS faces a growing diversity in the needs of neurodivergent students, requiring more tailored and varied educational programs. Special education in HCPSS provides a continuum of services for children from birth to age 21 with a wide range of individual needs, including speech, hearing, vision, cognitive, and emotional support.
 4. **Equity and Inclusiveness Initiatives:** While HCPSS has developed many initiatives to advance equity and embrace diversity and inclusion, there is a continuous effort to increase the diversity of teaching staff to better reflect the student body's growing diversity.
 5. **Engagement and Inclusion of Community:** There is an emphasis on including students, parents, families, and community members in decision-making groups that impact school culture, climate, and academic success, which can be a logistical and administrative challenge.

These issues illustrate the complex landscape of special education within HCPSS, marked by a need for more resources, better support structures for educators, and adaptive strategies to meet the diverse requirements of its students.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

The review should focus on evaluating the staffing needs to address the shortage of special education teachers, ensuring that resources align with the increasing diversity of student needs. Key areas include the adequacy of support for educators, effectiveness of existing programs, and compliance with federal and state regulations. Additionally, it should assess the financial management of special education funds, ensuring they are used effectively to enhance educational outcomes to ensure that students are receive the services they are entitled to by law.

Another primary goal is to enhance family and community engagement, ensuring that communication and collaboration are strengthened. The review should establish clear metrics for measuring success,



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including academic performance, graduation rates, and post-school outcomes. The aim is to create a responsive and equitable system that supports all students with disabilities, promoting their academic and social development in a sustainable manner.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

While I do not have personal experience, I have a strong network of friends and family who are knowledgeable about the challenges faced by students with disabilities. I plan to leverage their expertise, along with insights from other professionals, to effectively advocate for and support these students. This approach will enable me to gather a variety of perspectives and solutions, enriching my understanding and enhancing the impact of my advocacy efforts.

4. 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?

To truly elevate special education, we must think outside the box, beyond just allocating more funds. Consider this: an innovative mentorship program where our seasoned special education teachers share their wisdom with those just starting out, fast-tracking their expertise. It's about leveraging every resource, every bit of knowledge we have, to enrich the lives of these students. This isn't just about education; it's about building a community that lifts everyone up, together.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body. How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

To effectively monitor and address student mental health, our approach must include several key components. Early identification of at-risk students is essential leveraging a strong counseling program in each school, allowing us to intervene before issues escalate. Additionally, improving the overall school climate, especially in middle and high schools, is crucial. Survey results have shown concerning low levels of student perception of their school environment in these grades. By enhancing the school environment, we aim not just to boost academic success but also to significantly improve the emotional and psychological well-being of our students. Implementing this multifaceted strategy is essential for creating a supportive and responsive educational setting that addresses the mental health needs of our student body.

Compliance



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6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

To ensure compliance, I would implement a comprehensive monitoring system that regularly reviews and audits IEPs to verify that all service hours and supports are provided as required. This system would include feedback mechanisms for families to report any discrepancies or concerns directly and receive timely responses.

Additionally, training for staff on the importance of IEP compliance and the specific needs of students with disabilities will be enhanced to ensure that all personnel are well-equipped to deliver the required services. By fostering a culture of accountability and continuous improvement, we can better ensure that HCPSS meets its obligations and supports the educational and developmental needs of all students with disabilities.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

To address the concerns raised by parents regarding barriers to participation, I would propose regular audits of our language support services to ensure they meet the needs of all families. It is critical that families have an interpreter present at the IEP so they can understand the process and the implications for their child. Additionally, the district should provide ongoing training for staff on cultural competence and the importance of effective communication with non-English-speaking families. By implementing these measures, we can guarantee that all parents have the necessary tools and support to engage actively and effectively in IEP meetings, thereby enhancing their ability to advocate for their children's educational needs.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers in their home schools. Research has shown that inclusion of students with disabilities benefits ALL



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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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

I strongly support inclusive education as it benefits all students—enhancing empathy, diversity, and learning outcomes within the school community. Howard County's reputation for effectively integrating students with disabilities in general education classrooms alongside their nondisabled peers is commendable and aligns with best practices that advocate for such inclusive settings.

As a board member, my commitment would be to not only uphold but also strengthen this approach. This involves ensuring that sufficient resources and supports are consistently available to facilitate successful inclusion. Key strategies would include investing in professional development for teachers and staff to equip them with the skills necessary to address diverse learning needs and to implement inclusive practices effectively.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

As a board member, I would prioritize engaging with experts in autism and related fields to ensure that our strategies and interventions are based on the latest research and best practices. Collaborating with organizations such as the Autism Society would allow us to gain access to specialized resources and training programs that can benefit both educators and students. Additionally, actively seeking feedback from parents of children that have autism is essential. Parents are often the first to notice changes and challenges their children face, and their insights are invaluable in creating effective and responsive support systems. By incorporating their experiences and suggestions, we can ensure that our educational practices are truly inclusive and cater to the diverse needs of all students. This approach helps in tailoring our interventions and strengthens the community's trust and involvement in our educational system.

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?



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To address the need for non-physical interventions in light of the recent changes in law, HCPSS should engage with behavioral experts, psychologists, and special education professionals to guide and train staff in the latest and most effective techniques. This includes ongoing professional development in de-escalation tactics, conflict resolution, positive behavioral supports, and trauma-informed practices. By understanding the root causes of behaviors and managing challenging situations without physical interventions, staff can maintain a safe and supportive environment.

Furthermore, strengthening the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and establishing Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs) are crucial steps. PBIS promotes a positive school climate by teaching and reinforcing good behavior, while CITs, trained in advanced behavioral management techniques, respond to behavioral crisis effectively. Calm down corners or rooms can be helpful in providing a space for children, neurodiverse or otherwise, to return to a learning-ready state. Collaborating with parents and community organizations ensures consistency in supportive practices across school and home settings. A robust monitoring system for the use of restraint, with transparent reporting mechanisms, will ensure compliance and facilitate continuous improvement in student support strategies.

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

To better support students with disabilities in general education settings, HCPSS should implement system-wide enhancements in behavioral supports and accommodations. This includes integrating comprehensive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) across all schools, tailored to meet diverse student needs. Staff should receive regular training in inclusive teaching strategies and effective behavior management to foster an accessible learning environment. Additionally, ensuring that Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are rigorously followed and frequently reviewed can improve personalization of support. Collaboration between special education and general education teachers must be strengthened to facilitate seamless integration of accommodations, with a focus on creating a supportive classroom culture that recognizes and values diversity in learning needs.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?



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To significantly improve reading outcomes for all students, HCPSS should prioritize early intervention and screenings to identify reading difficulties early on, particularly focusing on the critical early grades. Enhanced collaboration between general and special education teachers will ensure consistent application of effective instructional methods across all classrooms. Additionally, expanding access to reading specialists and personalized learning tools will support students at various levels whether the student is working with an adapted general curriculum or requires intensive services. Engaging families through workshops and resources will further empower them to contribute to their children's literacy at home, creating a supportive and comprehensive approach to improve reading outcomes for every student, including those with disabilities.

13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

To ensure compliance with the Ready to Read Act and best practices recommended by the DIBELS screener, my plan would involve establishing a clear and consistent schedule for screening all K-5 students three times per year—at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year. This will involve training and equipping educators with the necessary tools and understanding of the DIBELS screening process to efficiently administer the screenings and accurately interpret the results. Additionally, the district will allocate adequate resources to manage and analyze the data collected, enabling timely interventions based on the screening outcomes. Coordination with teachers and support staff will be essential to integrate these screenings smoothly into the school calendar without disrupting other educational activities, ensuring that all students receive the assessments needed to identify and address any reading skill deficits early and effectively.

14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

The ongoing issues with transportation, particularly affecting our most vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, are deeply concerning and demand immediate and decisive action. HCPSS must prioritize the safety and reliability of school bus services by implementing stringent safety protocols, including comprehensive training for all bus personnel on disability awareness, emergency procedures, and behavior management. It is imperative that we also install monitoring systems, such as cameras on all buses, to



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ensure transparency and accountability at all times. Additionally, the school system must improve communication channels between transportation services, schools, and families to promptly address any concerns regarding late pickups and arrivals, ensuring that all students have safe, consistent, and stress-free access to education. Anything less is a failure to uphold our responsibility to protect and provide for our students, and such lapses cannot be tolerated.



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2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education Pravin Ponnuri

Overall / Funding Priorities

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

From what I hear from the community, some of the pressing issues in regard to HCPSS special education services include:

- **Access and Equity:** Some parents, especially those from low-income families or families where English is not the primary language, may not be aware of all the resources available within the school system. When they do become aware, they may find the process intimidating at times. This, coupled with the taboo associated with special needs in some communities, can make it difficult for parents to seek the support they need.
- **During 2014 to 2017,** the school system under the then superintendent made it very difficult for the parents of special needs children to receive the required Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While there have been improvements since then, more still needs to be done in this respect.
- **Staff Training and Support:** HCPSS employs an inclusive school system, and due to larger class sizes and reductions in Educational Support Personnel (ESP), classroom teachers have taken on additional responsibilities. While much is expected from classroom teachers, providing additional training could enhance their ability to understand and address the needs of special education students.
- **Transition Services:** A holistic approach to special education is essential, and more support is needed to help students prepare for the transition from school to post-secondary education, employment, or independent living.

These are just a few of the key issues that I have heard from the community, and I am eager to collaborate with the Autistic Society of Maryland to further understand their issues and concerns.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

The goals and outcomes for the review of special education in HCPSS should aim to:



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- Evaluate the effectiveness of current special education programs and services in meeting the needs of students with special needs.
- Identify areas for improvement in policies, procedures, and practices related to special education.
- Assess the allocation of resources and staffing levels to ensure adequate support for students with special needs.
- Gather feedback from parents, students, educators, and stakeholders to understand their experiences and perspectives.
- Develop recommendations for enhancing collaboration between general and special education teachers to promote inclusive practices.
- Enhance communication and transparency regarding special education services to ensure families are informed and empowered.
- Ensure compliance with state and federal laws related to special education services.

By addressing these goals, the review can lead to meaningful enhancements in special education services within HCPSS.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

Both of my children graduated from K-12 in HCPSS (Howard County Public School System), but I do not have personal experience advocating for students with disabilities as a parent. However, I have worked extensively with other parents and their children within HCPSS. I have organized multiple information sessions for parents of special needs children, collaborating with special needs consultants, the Board of Education, and the school system to raise awareness about available resources within HCPSS and assist families in navigating through the system. Additionally, I have volunteered as an entertainer for special needs children numerous times to bring smiles to their faces.

4. 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?

It is unfortunate that teachers are among the lowest paid professionals despite the high expectations placed on them. Education Support Personnel (ESP) often earn minimum wages, leading to a high rate of burnout in the profession. Increased pay would certainly be beneficial. Furthermore, the implementation of the ESP Bill of Rights, which allows for collective bargaining, is a positive step in the right direction.



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Additionally, the Federal Government was supposed to cover 40% of the Special Needs costs, but they have only been providing around 12%. Advocating for and receiving the promised funding from the Federal Government would greatly assist in retaining current ESPs and hiring additional personnel.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body. How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

It is very unfortunate that Mental health issues among the students has been growing in recent years, we can do the following to monitor and address this issue:

- Implement regular mental health screenings: Conduct periodic mental health screenings for all students to identify those who may be struggling and in need of support.
- Provide mental health education: Offer mental health awareness programs and resources to help students understand and recognize signs of mental health issues in themselves and others.
- Increase access to mental health professionals: Ensure that students have access to mental health professionals such as counselors, therapists, and psychologists for individual and group support.
- Establish a mental health task force: Create a task force dedicated to addressing student mental health issues, consisting of school staff, mental health professionals, parents, and students themselves.
- Foster a supportive school environment: Promote a school culture that prioritizes mental health and well-being, where students feel safe and supported to seek help when needed.
- Collaborate with community resources: Partner with external mental health organizations and resources to expand the support network available to students both in and out of school.
- Monitor student progress: Regularly track the mental health status and progress of students who have received support, and adjust interventions as needed to ensure positive outcomes.

By taking a proactive and comprehensive approach to monitoring and addressing student mental health, schools can create a supportive environment that promotes the well-being of all students.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will



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you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

Lack of funding has often been cited as the primary reason for inadequate services provided by HCPSS. However, with a yearly budget of \$1.5 billion and HCPSS spending the second highest amount per student in Maryland, this argument holds little weight.

It is essential to conduct a thorough examination of the budget and ensure accountability within the HCPSS administration for the services they are mandated to deliver. Implementing bottom-up budgeting and multi-year budgeting strategies will promote fiscal responsibility within the school system. Holding HCPSS accountable and demanding transparency will help guarantee the provision of legally obligated services.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

People from over 70 different countries who speak various languages live in Howard County. While it may be challenging for HCPSS to have translators for all these languages, we can collaborate with local non-profit organizations to ensure that we have volunteer translators available when needed.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

Like everything in life, there are always pros and cons to every initiative. I believe that having an inclusive school system promotes empathy and understanding of children with special needs among the student body. It also provides special needs children with the opportunity to work



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with their disabilities and feel included, helping them to excel. However, with increasing class sizes and high turnover of Education Support Personnel (ESP), it can be challenging for classroom teachers to maintain order in the class, thereby impacting the quality of education they can provide.

If the classroom teacher is unable to deliver quality education due to behavioral issues exhibited by certain students, which in turn affects other students negatively, we may need to consider reducing the inclusive time for those specific students with behavioral issues or, as a last resort, separate them from the classroom. This decision should be made on a case-by-case basis and with careful evaluation.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

To reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBDs), the following steps can be taken:

- Conduct a thorough review of the current support services and accommodations available to autistic students and those with EBDs within HCPSS.
- Collaborate with specialists, therapists, and experts in the field of autism and EBDs to assess the effectiveness of existing programs and interventions.
- Implement targeted training for teachers, staff, and Education Support Personnel (ESP) on strategies to effectively support and include students with autism or EBDs in the classroom.
- Enhance communication and collaboration between teachers, parents, and support staff to create individualized plans that address the specific needs of each student.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate the progress of students with autism or EBDs, making adjustments to support strategies as needed to ensure their success in inclusive educational settings.

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

HCPSS staff should consider implementing the following alternatives to physical restraint:

- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS): Implementing PBIS strategies can help prevent the escalation of behaviors that may lead to the need for physical restraint.
- De-escalation Techniques: Training staff in de-escalation techniques can help them manage challenging behaviors before they escalate to the point of requiring physical restraint.



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- Individualized Behavior Plans: Developing individualized behavior plans for students with a history of challenging behaviors can provide proactive strategies to address and prevent the need for physical restraint.
- Counseling and Mental Health Support: Providing students with access to counseling and mental health support services can address underlying issues that may contribute to behavioral challenges.
- Peer Support: Implementing peer support programs where students can support each other in managing emotions and behaviors can help create a positive and inclusive school environment.

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

To better support students with disabilities in the general education classroom, the following system-wide suggestions can be implemented:

- Implement a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS): This framework provides various levels of support based on student needs, ensuring that all students receive appropriate behavioral supports and accommodations.
- Provide Professional Development: Offer training and resources for teachers to effectively implement strategies to support students with disabilities in the general education setting.
- Individualized Education Plans (IEPs): Ensure that IEPs are thorough and include specific behavioral supports and accommodations tailored to the individual needs of students with disabilities.
- Collaborative Team Approach: Foster collaboration between general education teachers, special education teachers, support staff, and administrators to create a supportive environment for students with disabilities.
- Use Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS): Implement PBIS strategies to promote positive behavior and prevent the escalation of challenging behaviors in the general education classroom.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?

Falling education standards are one of the main concerns within the current education system. It is crucial to ensure that students grasp the fundamentals before moving on to more complex concepts. For instance, if a student lacks a solid understanding of multiplication and division, they will struggle with grasping derivatives. Early detection and intervention are essential to



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provide the necessary support for students to catch up, especially in areas like reading and comprehension.

The responsibility for a child's education cannot solely rest on the school system. Families and community organizations should also play a significant role in supporting children outside of school hours. Building partnerships with families and community organizations to promote reading at home and encouraging parental involvement in their child's literacy development are essential steps.

13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

Given the requirement to screen our kids three times a year as per the Higher Level Act, we should proactively establish a screening schedule, provide necessary training to teachers for conducting the screenings, and prioritize collecting and acting on the data to enhance reading skills.

14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

There is a nationwide shortage of bus drivers, which, coupled with the Zum Transportation contract issues, has resulted in longer bus rides and late arrivals. Providing basic empathy training for bus drivers can help alleviate the situation to some extent. Installing Closed Circuit cameras on buses can deter any abusive or harmful behavior by school bus personnel. Additionally, the school system should focus on optimizing bus routes and hold Zum accountable for their service quality.



2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education Meg Ricks

Due April 22

Overall / Funding Priorities

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

Some of the most pressing current issues in special education service in HCPSS are the continued and chronic vacancies in special education positions, the large amount of compensatory services owed to students, and the number of students that HCPSS cannot adequately educate, who need a private placement at the same time that there are not enough spaces in these programs available. These issues and more all contribute to the biggest issue which is students with disabilities not receiving the education they are entitled to.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

As a member of the OBRC, I supported a motion recommending the Board preserve funding for the review of special education. I want to see an objective evaluation of how we are actually doing in providing special education services. Are we closing gaps? Are we making progress? Are we leaving some students behind? Are we following the law and school system policy? I also want to see actionable recommendations for improvement.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

A couple of years ago, I came to the realization that all of us who care about education and want to advocate for it should be involved in advocating for special education. I have seen the struggles of friends who have to fight constantly for their children to get the education they are entitled to. I have tried to be a support to my sister who lives in another state as she all too frequently has to remind some of my nephew's teachers about the supports he is supposed to be receiving so that he can demonstrate his knowledge and not be punished for his ASD. In my work as a PTA leader, I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time in my children's schools



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during the school day. I witnessed some of the challenges the whole school faces when students get to the point of crisis. I started attending SECAC meetings to learn and to bring back information to my PTSA. As a part of my work as a preschool teacher's assistant, I've chosen continuing education courses to help me better understand and work with our students who are at the beginning of the process of early intervention or diagnosis. I really value the opportunity I have to learn from the professionals who come into our preschool classroom to work with our students receiving services. I feel like I still have a lot to learn, but I am committed to continuing to learn so that I can be a better advocate for all children and families.

4. 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?

More people, more time, more resources, more training- we need all of these things and they all require financial investment. In addition to money though, there needs to be a culture of care and support for students with disabilities, their families, and all of the staff who work with them. No amount of money (definitely no amount that a school system can afford to pay) is going to be worth it for people to take what they know is a challenging job in the best circumstances, in an environment where they are set up to fail, time and time again.

We need to have adequate staffing to provide the adult supervision students need. Every staff member works with students with disabilities at some point in the day so all staff should get training to help them to do so successfully. Creating incentives for teachers with special education certifications to take positions in special education is also something that HCPSS should consider.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body.
How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

Mental health has been of great concern to me since my time as an elementary school PTA president. If students are in crisis they cannot learn. If students are refusing to attend school because of anxiety or depression, they cannot learn. We have many students and families who need to be connected to mental health resources but don't know where to find them. I think that our school system can and should help to connect students and families to mental health services. I really want to push for counselors, school psychologists, and social workers to be hired in our schools at the recommended ratios. In the 2024 (current school year) proposed operating budget, additional positions to bring our high schools closer to the recommended ratios were requested but did not ultimately get funded. The existing ratios for elementary schools listed in that budget request document revealed a workload for counselors almost



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twice the size of what is recommended. I want to see the mental health of our students prioritized through adding positions to bring ratios closer to best practices and I also want to see more partnerships with community organizations to connect students and families to mental health services.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

This needs to be a focus and the Board needs to keep it a focus, asking for the data and requiring proof of actions taken to correct problems. I supported Delegate Atterbeary's burden of proof bill because I don't think it should be the responsibility of families to prove their child is not getting the services and supports they are entitled to, but rather, the responsibility of the school system to prove that they are complying with these legal requirements. While I am glad they were able to pass legislation to create a fund to assist families, bearing the burden of proof is still a great obstacle for families and will keep many from being able to pursue a case.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

All parents should have access to an interpreter if they need one to help them fully understand and participate in any type of meeting with the school and especially for IEP meetings. They should have someone familiar with the goals and purposes of these meetings with a knowledge base to help them advocate effectively for their students.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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



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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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

I agree that inclusive education is beneficial to all students when implemented with the necessary supports and services in place. Being together and getting to know students with disabilities helps non disabled students to accept and embrace them as their peers. It dispels harmful stereotypes or fears stemming from ignorance. We are an inclusive program in our preschool. We have helped some students thrive who have been sent away from other programs. Having a smaller class size and better teacher to student ratio than we often have in the HCPSS really makes a huge difference.

To have an inclusive program, it truly needs to be inclusive of all students and set up for all students to thrive. We need to make sure we are identifying needed supports, providing the staffing and training needed to provide those supports with fidelity, and supporting and listening to the staff who are doing the work.

We also must support and partner with families to ensure that needs are being met and every student can learn, grow, and reach their potential.

9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

This is definitely an area where more high quality training is needed. We can avert a crisis situation with correct, early actions. Having necessary staff present and able to do their jobs is crucial. This has to be a focus because no one is able to learn when they are in crisis. Injuries and major disruptions can and must be prevented.

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

I would like to see continued training to help staff de-escalate situations and to use trauma informed practices to assist students whose behaviors may be impacted by adverse childhood events they have experienced or may currently be experiencing. From what I heard in the Board meeting discussion of Ukeru in 2022 and the information shared in the September 2023 Restraint and Seclusion report on the experiences of those implementing it in the past two



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years, it seems promising for decreasing the use of physical restraint. Close monitoring of incidences of restraint must continue.

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

High quality training for all staff would be very helpful for increasing understanding and skills necessary to support students with disabilities' full participation in the general education classroom. Maintaining appropriate staffing levels is also crucial. I also think keeping class sizes from increasing helps all students and is even more impactful for students with disabilities.

Special Education Programs and Issues

12. Reading is the foundation of educational success; students who struggle to read often are not 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 should HCPSS work to improve reading outcomes for all students?

We need to use programs that work. If students cannot read, they cannot progress in other subjects and they become much more likely to experience negative outcomes. We need to provide more support for students who are not able to read at their grade level. The sooner we can get students the help that they need the better. It is much easier to address problems before they compound and students get further behind in every subject. It is also stressful and demoralizing for students; not being able to read at the level needed to do their school work.

13. The Ready to Read Act requires 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 three (3) times each school year. What would be your plan to ensure such recommended screening of all students K-5?

In order to conduct these screenings and to utilize the information they provide, the staff who conduct them need to have the time to complete the screenings and also do their regular work with students. My understanding is that this screening is time intensive because it has to be conducted one on one. If we have staff with specialized training that can do things that other staff cannot do, then we should be taking more of the non-specialized tasks off of their plates to help free up their time. Adequate budgeting and pushing for a better workload for staff are two things I would focus on to help us address this vital work in line with best practices.



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14. Many students are experiencing busing issues, and students with disabilities (who are provided specialized transportation) often have longer bus rides, are more sensitive to changes in routines, and may not be able to communicate what happens on the bus. Parents are concerned about late pickup and arrivals, and safety on the school bus. We know of students who have been severely harmed by school bus personnel. What should HCPSS be doing to ensure safe and reliable transport for its most vulnerable students?

If the staff on our specialized transportation buses are not currently HCPSS staff, I would like to see that change. We need to make sure that they have the training needed to keep every student safe. If there are no cameras currently on these buses they should be added so that any concerns can be effectively investigated and to deter inappropriate or unsafe actions.



2024 Candidate Questionnaire Special Education ANDREA CHAMBLEE

Overall / Funding Priorities

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

Students with IEPs spend most of their time in a classroom with a teacher who has no disability specific training. This should be mandatory for all General Education teachers.

2. The board voted to allocate funds for a review of special education. What do you believe should be the goals/outcomes for that review?

More money is being spent on services but the outcomes are not improving. We need to identify exactly what is working and what isn't so we can stop paying for what isn't working and invest more heavily in what is. There doesn't seem to be any long term strategy from the Department of Special Education and the results of the audit will hopefully help elucidate some actionable points that can be incorporated into a comprehensive long term plan. Another goal should be to identify our out of compliance areas and determine the root causes.

3. What experience do you have as a parent, professional or advocate working on behalf of students with disabilities? What sets you apart from other candidates with regard to advocacy for students with disabilities?

I have dedicated my entire adult life to keeping the public safe. I was a compliance officer at the FDA and I am Maryland's foremost gun safety advocate.

4. 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?

We need to make a clearer pathway for para educators who would like to become teachers. Special educators are often at higher risk of personal injury and they aren't always trained in the most effective deescalation techniques, which can lead to them feeling like they are not equipped to protect themselves and others. We can't lighten their caseloads until we have



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more of them and we won't get more of them until we pay them a lot better and give them the tools they need to do their jobs without hurting a student or themselves.

5. There are serious mental health issues across the student body. How do you plan to monitor and address student mental health?

School Building Culture and Climate is everything. There are students who would rather die than go to school. There are parents who would prefer for their child to be truant than risk another day in a place where they want to die. When things are that bad, no amount of crisis hotline posters are going to help.

We need to stop talking about being excluded and bullied like it's some trivial, temporary blip that kids just get over. We need to normalize talking about this in terms of life or death. Kids need to know that their actions, words, and behaviors can have significantly harmful impacts on other kids. And teachers need to understand that every time they look the other way, they are putting a child's life in danger. We also need to cultivate a restorative culture where acceptance and inclusion are second nature. In communities where relationships are prioritized, students really thrive. A sense of belonging is essential.

Compliance

6. Many families are concerned that the district is not complying with its responsibilities on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), with missed service hours or insufficient supports. What will you do to make sure HCPSS is in compliance with its legal obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities?

I have been urging the current Board of Education members to make Special Education compliance a requirement in the new Superintendent's contract. Accountability is important and things won't get better until failing to do so costs them their job. I attribute the compliance issues to central office. We know our educators are doing the best that they can and they aren't responsible for the lack of resources.

7. According to the procedural safeguards, parents for whom English is not their primary language is entitled to have an interpreter at IEP meetings who understands the IEP/educational process and who speaks both English and their primary 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



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children's IEP meetings? (Just noting that I have not heard that this has been an issue, Andy. Every parent who has requested an interpreter has had one present at the IEP meeting in my experience.)

I know several parents who speak English as their first language and still struggle mightily with navigating and participating in the IEP process. I can only imagine how difficult it would be for parents who don't speak English. Of course translators should be available for every family who needs them but that's really not solving the core issue. The core issue is that all parents struggle with the IEP process, especially when they are new to it. The forms that the state requires don't make sense to families. HCPSS could and should provide families with more straightforward documentation to supplement the required paperwork. It's also the case that in practice, parents aren't always invited to participate. Talking at someone and asking them to sign off on what's been prepared is not an invitation to participate. The real opportunities for parent input come in the form of referral paperwork and surveys that parents must prepare on their own time, without an advocate or a translator. In short, the processes don't seem to be designed in such a way that encourages families to take part in the planning and strategizing.

Inclusion

8. Howard County is known in the state of Maryland for being an inclusive school system when it comes to educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled 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, how would you support and strengthen inclusive education?

A large part of this goes back to some of the previous answers with regard to General Education teachers being ill-equipped to foster maximum inclusivity. If, for example, our special education workforce has not received proper training in seclusion and restraint — that all but guarantees Gen Ed teachers haven't either. Inclusion is the way it should be. That should be a top priority for every school system. I think most people push back against it because the proper groundwork hasn't been laid. The system isn't set up for success, but that doesn't mean we should abandon the goal. It means we need to fix the foundation so that students with disabilities can be included without hesitation.



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9. Autistic students and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are increasingly missing out on the value of inclusive education because of social-emotional issues. What steps would you take to reexamine how HCPSS is supporting students with autism or EBDs?

I can't over emphasize how crucial it is for all general education teachers to be trained in disability specific awareness and response techniques. We still have schools in Howard County that indulge in the illegal practice of soft suspensions, where they just call a parent to come get their child because they're "having a bad day."

Discipline / behavior

10. What alternatives to physical restraint should HCPSS staff employ, particularly now that the law has banned seclusion and requires corrective action plans when overuse of restraint is reported?

HCPSS had funding in FY23 and FY24 that was earmarked for training that would have taught our educators many alternatives to seclusion and restraint, but they were never given the training.

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

Mandatory training for general education teachers in specific disabilities. Gen Ed teachers must learn how to teach their students with learning differences.