



HOWARD COUNTY AUTISM SOCIETY

January 22, 2020

To: Howard County Board of Education

CC: Dr. Michael Martirano, HCPSS Superintendent
William Barnes, HCPSS Chief Academic Officer
Dr. Terri Savage, HCPSS Executive Director of Special Education
Mai Hall, Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC) Co-Chair
Stephanie Carr, Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC) Co-Chair

From: Education Advocacy Committee – Howard County Autism Society (HCAS)

Subject: HCAS Support of HCPSS Budget Request Related to Special Education

Dear HCPSS Board of Education Representatives,

On behalf of the Howard County Autism Society (HCAS) and specifically its Education Advocacy Committee, I am writing to you today to express our strong support for the Special Education portion of the FY21 Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) Budget submitted by Superintendent Dr. Martirano.

As the student population grows, so too does the number of special education students being supported by HCPSS. However, the percentage growth is higher amongst the special education population, a trend that has continued from recent years. Along with growth in numbers, we have also seen a rise in the complexity and diversity of needs of students across the county. When you add to that the questionable budget and programming decisions made by the last school administration that eroded the supports offered to some of our most vulnerable children, it should come as no surprise to anyone that the gap between available resources, and required resources, is so large. If we do not adequately staff special education, everyone loses; teachers burn out and leave, morale plummets, and our children fail.

This is *déjà vu*. One year ago to the date of this letter, we wrote a similar letter of testimony in support of the proposed special education budget. Though some of the details have changed, our key areas of advocacy remain focused on staffing and training.

- *The addition of a BCBA and the behavior support positions* attempt to counteract the growing diversity and complexity of behavioral support needs in our community. These additional staff will allow for increased in-classroom visits, and will enable the opportunity for ensuring proper development of Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), training of staff on

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the proper implementation of BIPs, and ongoing, more frequent, review of BIPs. All areas we have advocated for as needs.

- *The addition of an instructional facilitator position* to oversee the growing continuum of services at the Elementary School level. The numbers of specialized classrooms have increased over the past couple of years in an effort to expand the opportunities available at HCPSS. That growth has necessitated additional oversight so that these specialized programs can get the proper attention they deserve and help to ensure that the programs involved, and students supported, continue to improve.
- *The addition of two resource teachers to the non-public and SE compliance office* to begin the multi-year effort to develop and provide crucial trainings and additional supports around proper implementation of the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are the cornerstone of the federally mandated Free and Appropriate Public Education that all our children are owed.
- And, last but certainly not least, *the addition of nearly 217 special education staffing positions* across all ages of students supported by the special education department in HCPSS. This staffing increase request is critical to providing the needed support in our schools and ensuring the best practice of meaningful inclusion that was once a hallmark of HCPSS. This meaningful inclusion can only happen with sufficient, and properly trained, staff.
 - o Nearly 24 additional related service providers including SLP, PT, OTs to lighten caseloads and be able to provide more personalized supports to the many needs of the students.
 - o 51 additional teachers to provide proper instruction to the growing student population in an expanded number of classrooms and classroom types.
 - o 51 additional paras to provide classroom supports to the teachers, staff and students across our stretched and strained system.
 - o 91 additional SAs to provide student-centered supports and key interactions to help foster student involvement in the curriculum. This is the group that typically works most directly with our students and therefore can have a significant impact, either positive or negative, on the student's ability to access the instruction of the teacher. It should be noted that 40 of these 91 positions are transferred from Temporary Employee (TE) positions. This is a key point that should not be overlooked. We believe that by directly employing those who provide the day-to-day and hour-to-hour supports for our students we get the double-benefit of reduced turnover of staff as well as additional training opportunities that are not otherwise available with contracted services.

As I alluded to earlier, many of these same points were made in our letter last year. Unfortunately, our feedback was not followed. In the \$5+ million that the BOE eliminated from the SE budget was the following:

- 4.9 of the additional 6.9 SLPs (71% of the requested positions cut).
- 45.5 of the additional 98 paras (46% of the requested positions cut).
- And 79 of the 114 requested SA positions (69% of the requested positions cut). Again, this final category includes those providing hour-to-hour supports to students, thereby placing a larger burden on the use of TEs and other staff already overtasked to attempt to meet the needs of the students' IEPs.

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In this past year alone;

- We have seen a continued rise in the diversity of needs, the complexity of challenges, and the sheer number of students requiring supports.
- We have heard from a multitude of parents and teachers concerned about the understaffed and undertrained classrooms supporting their students.
- We witnessed four brave special education staff members testify in front of you about the dire nature of the barriers impeding them from providing the services to our children that these teachers yearn to provide.
- We saw a special education department so diluted that the HCEA felt the need to file a class action grievance on behalf of more than 70 of those teachers focusing on the severe effects of the underfunding on the staff, and on our children.

We must provide the resources necessary to keep our dedicated special educators in place and our children in classrooms with sufficient support.

Fully fund Special Education as requested in the FY2021 budget.

There are no other viable options for working to ensure our children are given the education they deserve.

Yours sincerely,



Roger E. Thibaudeau, Jr.
Chair, Education Advocacy Cmte
Howard County Autism Society



Melissa Rosenberg
Executive Director
Howard County Autism Society



Patrick Boxall
President, Board of Directors
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