



# HOWARD COUNTY AUTISM SOCIETY

July 30, 2020

To: Dr. Michael Martirano, HCPSS Superintendent  
William Barnes, HCPSS Chief Academic Officer

CC: 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: Concerning Plans for HCPSS Special Education for Fall 2020.

Dear Dr. Martirano and Mr. Barnes,

On behalf of the Howard County Autism Society (HCAS) and specifically its Education Advocacy Committee, we are writing to you today to express our concern over the potential impacts of the Fall 2020 school plans on our Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) students receiving special education services. While we certainly understand the HCPSS position looking at the safety of students and staff alike, we also know that virtual learning is inaccessible for several groups in Howard County, and at the top of that list are those students in special education who are younger and/or have more significant needed supports.

In mid-June, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) recognized this concern, and, as part of the Maryland Phase 2 recovery plan, allowed for in-person instruction focused on nonpublic special education schools and child care centers. In addition, their 'Maryland Together School Recovery Plan' advises districts to "consider individual or small group instruction" when the IEP cannot be implemented remotely. That is why we, and many of the families we have heard from over the past two weeks, are disappointed that there was little mention of special education services in the July 15<sup>th</sup> decision and subsequent announcement concerning the Fall 2020 fully-virtual plan, and there has been little to no communication or announcement addressing these vulnerable populations to the community in the two weeks since that decision. With just over a month before the start of school, even the special educators who are working with our families this summer have little information how services may be delivered in just a few weeks.

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9770 Patuxent Woods Drive, Suite 308 • Columbia, MD 21046  
410-290-3466 • [www.howard-autism.org](http://www.howard-autism.org) • [info@howard-autism.org](mailto:info@howard-autism.org)

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With that said, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Savage and her team, who have set up periodic stakeholder meetings with leaders of our committee and our advocacy partners at the Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC) since the closing of schools in March. We have greatly appreciated each of the six meetings we have had, and have benefitted as a school system with these opportunities to exchange ideas and updates in both directions. It is because of that continued transparency and partnership under Dr. Savage's leadership that we believe the workgroups, including the one led by Mr. Barnes, and working tirelessly to look at options for all our students beyond the strictly virtual approach. However, with little detail available beyond that, we do not have sufficient information to go back to our constituents and provide them with that same optimism.

Similarly, because we don't have full insight into what is being considered, we want to provide some key feedback and advocacy points from our perspective to consider as you finalize plans and move forward:

- Small group or one-on-one instruction for as many as safely as possible starting with those with more significant needs.
- Additional training and support opportunities for families in order to facilitate the child's individual learning.
- Use of para-educators and student assistants to provide additional supports, virtual or in person, as needed per students' IEPs.
- Where appropriate, in-person home based services to guide students through lessons
- Delivery of related services (SLP, OT, etc.) as per a students' IEP either virtually or in-person as necessary.
- A developed process for staff follow-up with students who are not participating or completing assignments so interventions, by family members or staff, can be put in place prior to students failing and falling behind.
- Possibility of a more flexible virtual school day and the possibility of IEP meetings later in the day to accommodate parents who are working from home and facilitating online learning.

Regression, and a growing gap with their peers, is a real and major concern for many of our special education families who do not believe they will be able to access the curriculum in a fully-virtual model. This is especially true for those in our community who have relied on more intensive education models like multiple intensive needs classrooms and Cedar Lane that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. It may be necessary for creative and out-of-the box thinking to deliver the services the special education community needs to have a chance get the services our kids need to endure and thrive, and to fulfill the districts continued obligation to offer an appropriate public education to special education students.

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These are trying times for everyone. I do not envy the HCPSS team for the task in front of them in planning for the best possible educational experiences for all our children. And I know that the details required for a successful plan take time to iron out. However, I also know the building concern and trepidation amongst the many families in our community for the plight of their children in the coming months. Not to mention the dilemma of many parents who will need to make significant life choices – going to part-time work, taking a leave of absence, or quitting work in order to facilitate their child’s online learning. Some of this concern can be relieved with communication and transparency from your team into the types of plans being considered and the status of efforts underway. We urge that you provide updates to the community as soon as feasibly possible so that families, and staff, can move forward with you in preparation.

As always, we are here to assist in any way possible. Please feel free to reach out to us and our advocacy partners if there is some way we can help.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,



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



Melissa Rosenberg  
Executive Director  
Howard County Autism Society