



HOWARD COUNTY AUTISM SOCIETY

Testimony of Andrew Stettner
Chair, Education Committee
Howard County Board of Education
February 16, 2021

Thanks to the Board of Education, and the staff, for this opportunity to testify in support of the Superintendent's budget request to the Board of Education.

The 2020-2021 school year, and the switch to virtual instruction, has been an especially difficult one for the special education population. For most of our children, despite the challenges they face, going to school is the highlight of the week, a chance to interact and be part of their community like any other kid. Moreover, the special education population relies on one-on-one support, physical materials, and vocational experiences as well as speech, occupational, behavioral and physical therapies that have been extremely difficult to replicate in the virtual learning environment. We deeply appreciate the continued communication and collaboration between Dr. Savage and the team at the DSE to develop novel strategies to overcome these challenges.

Nonetheless, we know that many of our special education students have lost ground this year and will be relying on robust programming to make up for those gaps when schools begin to open for them on March 1st, throughout the summer and into the next school year. Compensatory services to make up for documented learning losses are part of the rights of special education students to a free and appropriate public education, and part of our District's responsibility to educate all in our community.

In this context, we urge the Board of Education to adopt a budget that gives the special education team the resources to help the student body to catch up from those learning losses during the next school year. While it can feel like a lifetime since our students have been in classrooms, we do remember the significant staffing shortages that impacted the special education population. The lack of trained staff became so acute that the HCEA was forced to file a grievance about the inability of the current staff to maintain the safety of their students. And DSE must have the resources in place to train staff, both special and general education, on strategies needed to effectively include students in classes that bring out their best abilities while positively managing behavioral challenges.

The \$5.4 million increase in the special education budget has been developed as the minimum needed to keep up with enrollment of students. Almost all of this increase, \$3.8 million will go to teachers and paraeducators, that will directly work with students, including 33 new positions among the school age population and 27.5 new positions with the Birth-5 age population. The proposed budget also includes a necessary \$1.0 million increase in non-public school tuition for those students that cannot be adequately served in the district, and this funding too goes directly to instructional costs. This item is one way the budget attempts to predict a possibility for compensatory services, which are required by law but still hard to predict at this time.

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9770 Patuxent Woods Drive, Suite 308 • Columbia, MD 21046
410-290-3466 • www.howard-autism.org • info@howard-autism.org

The historic underfunding of special education in the District has created inequities that still need to be addressed and fall hardest on low-income students and students of color. As part of his commitment to equity, we commend Dr. Martirano for his long-term commitment to addressing these historical inequities, that represent by his estimate a total of \$70 million in unmet needs related to equity.

It is vital for the board to understand that this year's budget does not go as far in this direction as last year's request. Indeed, the Superintendent has requested more than 40 fewer special education staff in this year's budget than he had requested last year at this time, despite a projected growth of 163 students. Think of it this way -- the Superintendent has already done the Board's work for it, reducing this year's budget to what are the absolutely most vital resources for the special education population. We would like to see more in this budget -- more instructional facilitators to support best practices among the staff and more permanent student assistants to anchor the work of our educators. More than in other years, significant cutbacks in this budget request will be deeply felt by the special education community, compromising the safety and educational progress of our community.