



# The State of Howard County Schools

**Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Interim Superintendent**  
**Howard County Public School System**

Prepared Remarks, Howard County Chamber of Commerce, September 14, 2017

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I am delighted to stand before you to present the State of the Howard County Public School System. I would like to thank all of you for attending this special and important occasion.

Before I begin, I'd like to ask that you join me in a moment of silence in remembrance of Wilde Lake High School teacher, Ms. Laura Wallen, who was found deceased yesterday. My heart goes out to the people who prayed so hard for her safe return and are devastated by this news. Please continue to keep Ms. Wallen's family and loved ones in your thoughts and prayers.

Your presence today truly shows your commitment to public education. Howard County is rich in many ways, but its most valuable resource may be our dedicated, caring community. Our school system enjoys a level of community support that would be the envy of most other school systems.

More than 1,000 organizations partner with our schools and system, representing businesses, non-profits and government agencies. Our partners contribute invaluable time, expertise, and resources to enrich our educational program and give students the best start in life.

Many of our most valued partners are also Chamber members. I am glad to have this opportunity to give you a personal thank you for all you do for our students.

I give a special thank you to Leonardo McClarty and the Howard County Chamber of Commerce, for sponsoring this event and supporting our schools in so many ways.

I am privileged to have the support of an outstanding Board of Education.

Several Board members are here today. Thank you Chair Vaillancourt, Kirsten Coombs, Christina Delmont-Small, Ananta Hejeebu and Anna Selbrede for joining us.

I'd also like to thank the members of my Executive Leadership Team. Please stand.

Representatives of the Bright Minds Foundation are here, and I want to thank them for their wonderful work on behalf of our students and schools.

Howard County Teacher of the Year, Maddy Halbach, is also here today. Dr. Halbach is a teacher in our Academy of Finance career academy at the Applications and Research Laboratory (ARL). She was announced last week as one of seven finalists for Maryland State Teacher of the Year; the state winner will be announced in October. She was also a finalist for the Washington Post teacher of the year.

Maddy is joined today by ARL Principal Karl Schindler, who does a tremendous job advocating on behalf of the many exciting programs at the ARL.

Today is a new day at the Howard County Public School System. We are entering the new school year with a renewed commitment to our students, parents and community members. Just as importantly, we are renewing the supportive relationships with one another.

We've invited our community to share their photos and messages on social media using the #NewDayHCPSS hashtag. But it's more than just a hashtag. It is a commitment we make together to lead with equity, with intentionality and with purpose.

Last year, Money Magazine ranked Columbia as the Best Place to Live in America, and cited the county's outstanding schools among the leading factors.

As business leaders, you are well aware that public school quality is a primary driver of economic prosperity.

Economist Anirban Basu has noted that our school system has a direct, positive impact on our local economy, totaling approximately 8 percent of county output.

- HCPSS is an \$819 million business and is Howard County's largest employer.
- It supports nearly 13,000 jobs in the county and drives \$1.85 billion in annual local business sales.
- We have well over 7 million square footage of space across 83 buildings, and our school buses drive more than 30,000 miles daily.

We receive the largest proportion of county dollars and we are entrusted to ensure that our 56,000 children receive the highest quality education in a nurturing and inclusive learning environment. I am committed to making sure we use your investment with fidelity.

Howard County has an outstanding school system by nearly every academic measure you can find. These measures give us a sense of success but also where we need to do better.

SAT scores are one tool that we use to indicate student achievement and college and career readiness. Our SAT scores show that Howard County students are doing quite well. The average composite score for the HCPSS Class of 2016 (the most recent information currently available) was 1647, nearly 100 points above the College Board college readiness benchmark of 1550.

Eighty-two percent earned Advanced Placement (AP) exam scores at levels 3–5, and HCPSS is the only Maryland school system to earn placement on the AP District Honor Roll.

Howard County also continues to exceed state norms on PARCC. PARCC provides an additional indicator into student progress, and can be a valuable tool for supporting student achievement when used in tandem with other indicators.

One area of growth is dual enrollment with Howard Community College, where students can

earn college credit while still in high school and parents can save money. We currently have 279 students in 447 courses within three programs connected to HCC, with dual enrollment classes at all high schools and more extensive early college programs at the Applications and Research Laboratory and Oakland Mills High School.

We are working to increase these offerings, while at the same time, we're moving forward with plans to place the ARL with a more robust middle-high school career center to further strengthen our career preparation opportunities.

We're also exploring options for digital learning, so more students can take courses not offered in their school. For example, one teacher at Long Reach can teach Chinese remotely to students at high schools throughout the county. Last school year we served 243 students through web-based and synchronous video technology enabled courses in Chinese, Differential Equations and AP U.S. History. This year, we have expanded to include Latin.

I look forward to exploring how we can serve more students with World Language classes, while also managing limited resources. With these distance learning options, we can provide our students digital learning options that in the future can help us maximize the potential for each and every student.

Howard County has an extremely high graduation rate - over 93 percent in 2016 (the most recent figure currently available). It is well above the state average and is the highest rate among the six Maryland school systems with more than 50,000 students. In short, the majority of our students are doing very well.

But, remember what I said about performance measures working both ways?

A 93 percent graduation rate means 7 percent didn't graduate this spring. That's 300 of our children. To put it in perspective, if each of us in this room had a child in HCPSS, 14 of us would have a child that didn't graduate.

We know how challenging it can be to find a good job even with a college degree. But the prospects are truly bleak for anyone who lacks even a high school diploma.

Dropouts make up about half of the welfare rolls, and commit about 75 percent of the crime in the U.S. They have a 60-90 percent chance of becoming incarcerated, at an average cost to the community of about \$35,000 per year. In contrast, the annual cost to educate a student is \$10.8 thousand nationally, and \$14.8 thousand here in Howard County.

As business leaders, you'll easily see the disconnect in these current investment priorities. We must do more for our young people who are at risk of dropping out and offer alternative pathways to graduation. It's about equity. And it is about investing in the right ways to guarantee a better future for our children and our community.

How do we do that?

To teach a child well, you must know a child well. Our school enrollment consists of nearly 56,000 unique students attending grades Pre-K through Grade 12. Our students count on us, each day, to teach, protect and nurture them so that they can grow academically, emotionally and socially.

We work hard to maintain a healthy and positive learning environment in each of our 76 county schools. Our system is diverse:

- 21 percent of our student body is Asian;
- 23 percent are African American;
- 10 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino;
- 39 percent are White; and
- 6 percent identify as two or more races
- 100 countries are represented
- 82 languages are spoken
- 600 students are homeless

While on the whole, the Howard County student body does very well, a closer look at the data behind the numbers shows a more complex picture.

Ours is the fastest-growing county in Maryland. But growing even faster than our student population is the proportion who face significant challenges: those who live in poverty and other difficult situations.

Nearly 22 percent of our students receive Free or Reduced Meals (FARMs), which is a measure of poverty (though the actual number is likely much higher, because 22 percent represents only the families who chose to submit the paperwork). That figure has doubled in just the last 10 years, from an 11 percent rate in 2006-07.

With the growth in our population and enrollment comes an even more rapid growth in the number and proportion of Howard County students who face the challenges that lead to dropping out. Students who live in poverty and difficult family situations are far more likely to struggle academically.

As a community that depends on our schools as an integral driver of our local economy, we simply cannot afford to accept the status quo. We must move with urgency to turn around the prospects for the 7 percent of students who are at dire risk, and give these most vulnerable young people the quality education that offers the best possible start in life, regardless of zip code or family circumstances.

For me, this is personal. I care deeply and personally about each student in our system. I simply cannot rest while any child in our system or community is in need or at risk. We must take care of ALL children - the lost, leftover and forgotten, our highest achievers and everybody in between.

I would like to share with you the inspiring story of a student who spoke at the Wilde Like High School graduation this year. Saquan Maxwell is originally from West Baltimore and came to

Wilde Lake in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade to live with a guardian. Saquan is a very bright young man, but he brought with him some challenges with anger, trust, and how to effectively communicate with teachers and other adults. He almost had to repeat the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but his Principal and Assistant Principal took him under his wing. By working with Saquan, his guardian, and a teacher, Saquan was able to make up his English class and be promoted to 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Another teacher saw Saquan's leadership potential, and encouraged him to join the school mentoring program for younger students, and Saquan did a great job. In his senior year, Saquan and some friends started a student voice circle for older male students to share experiences with the underclassman, and it too was a great success.

Saquan spoke eloquently and honestly at graduation about his experiences at Wilde Lake High. He thanked his teachers and administrators for their unwavering support, and brought the crowd to tears.

Saquan is a living example of the tremendous impact we each can have on a young life. By knowing a child well, we can teach a child well, and give them the individual support that makes all the difference.

I have deep roots in Howard County, and in returning to this school system, in many ways I am home. I served as Director of School Administration here for four years, my children attended Howard County schools and a daughter graduated from Atholton High School.

I have come back with a commitment to renewing and repairing relationships with our students, parents and community members and organizations. I have sought out individuals, groups and organizations throughout the county to listen and respond to their concerns and feedback.

I also have worked hard to establish a collaborative relationship with our Board of Education and County Government leaders to lay a strong foundation of progress in our mutual goals.

- We're working with our labor unions to determine the causes of our health and dental fund deficiency and put in place a plan to address its sustainability.
- Our productive relationship with the county government also allowed us to secure enough funds to build a long-overdue replacement school for Talbott Springs Elementary, and to accelerate the opening of a much needed, long overdue 13th high school. I am pleased that I was able to work with County Executive Allan Kittleman and his budget team to develop a proposed Capital Budget that is in line with fiscal realities but also advances our equity agenda. I look forward to working with the Board of Education to submit the budget to the county and I look forward to working with the County Council to build on our collaboration from the last budget cycle.
- I have reestablished a productive working relationship with our state government, leading to the restoration of \$9.6 million in essential capital funding.

I'm grateful that our Board of Education, local officials and community leaders partnered with me to acquire the necessary funding for the new school year, which honors negotiated agreements and avoids staff furloughs.

- We are re-aligning our budget, staffing, resources and operations with a focus on the classroom, to increase equity and responsiveness.
- We restored 87 support staff to the media centers and classrooms, to ensure media centers would stay open, in response to teacher and parent concerns.
- I have taken swift action to establish a more productive, collaborative partnership with parents of students with special needs. We have established a new Special Education Parent Liaison position to foster a connection between the school district and parents of students with disabilities.

I have restructured the Central Office with intentionality and purpose to better position the school system for sustained progress and to address and overcome factors that contribute to the achievement gap. Three new Community Superintendents and six Chief positions have helped us achieve a flatter leadership structure that is responsive and attentive to the needs of our stakeholders. We're improving communications, fostering collaboration, supporting creativity, encouraging celebration, but more importantly, we're leading with compassion.

Our hiring initiatives are bringing in a pool of new teachers that is more reflective of our student population. Research shows that students are more engaged in learning when they share a similar cultural, social or economic background as their teachers.

For example, 19 percent of this year's new teachers are African American, which is an increase of 11.3 percent last year, and on par with our student body. We will continue to expand our efforts to attract highly qualified and diverse teaching candidates.

Overall, we increased the diversity of new teacher hires from 27.6 percent last year to 32 percent this year.

An initiative that we plan to expand to all high schools is the Teacher Academy of Maryland. This will not only provide a career pathway for our students, but also create a pipeline of future homegrown educators.

We are addressing head-on several chronic challenges that have interfered with our system's progress and challenged our relationships with our stakeholders.

- I have initiated a forensic audit to examine our budget practices over the past several years.
- We are taking a close look at our chronic health care fund deficit, to determine underlying causes and long-term solutions.

We are placing the highest premium on openness and transparency, by actively responding to questions, input and feedback from all stakeholders.

- I have made transparency and timeliness of responses to Maryland Public Information Act requests a top priority. This summer we launched a new online MPIA tracking system to make public requests and responsive documents readily accessible to the community.

Howard County has everything it takes to be a premier model for preK-12 education in this country. If we can't get it right in Howard County, where can it be done?

We have a tremendous team of educators who possess exceptional passion and skill. Our talented Board of Education members and local government leaders are strongly committed to students and recognize the importance of our school system to county prosperity, today and into the future.

Our community is strongly committed to education and partners with our system to promote the interests of our students.

An issue our community has been extremely engaged with recently is Redistricting. Redistricting is one of the most significant challenges we have faced this year. We must take action to relieve the overcrowding at many schools. However, I have heard from many stakeholders about the disruption that a major boundary line adjustment would cause to many schools and communities.

The confluence of the Attendance Area Adjustment process with the start of the Capital Improvement Program development process has given us a unique opportunity to alleviate overcrowding in our schools, while at the same time moving forward in our mission to ensure equitable outcomes and support the success of all students.

The recommended budget, in conjunction with a multi-year boundary adjustment plan, will level capacity utilization among schools while avoiding the disruption of a broad-scale boundary line adjustment. At the same time, the budget provides the facilities needed to give every student access to the high quality educational opportunities that lead to lifelong success.

By moving to a multi-year boundary adjustment plan, we will address overcrowding over the long term, while minimizing student displacement, improving equity and adding new instructional opportunities for all students.

This is an ongoing process. On October 3, I will make my final recommendation to the Board of Education.

I appreciate your indulging me today to hear about some of our accomplishments and initiatives.

I have issued a bold new strategic call to action for HCPSS and for our broader community that will help guide us in our work.

“Learning and Leading with Equity: The Fierce Urgency of Now” draws on the inspiring words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to build an instructional program that enables each and every student to reach their greatest potential.

We are focusing our resources and priorities to make certain that every child graduates from high school and is prepared for the world of work and ready to enter college.

Good nutrition is fundamental to learning and achievement. I was pleased this year to expand the Let's Rethink Lunch program into all elementary schools, to add a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and appealing, healthy new school menu options. I'd like to acknowledge the Horizon Foundation for their work in piloting this initiative last year.

To provide essential nutrition to our most needy students during the summer months, we extended the Summer Meals Program, and took part in the County Weekend Warrior program.

As you can see by the accolades on the slide, our success in improving nutrition and well-being for all students is serving as a model to other districts.

Our community partnerships are essential in preparing students for meaningful employment in a dynamic workplace.

- Our business community supports us in identifying the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills *all* students need, whether or not they are headed to college.
- We are building on our relationships with local organizations to improve and expand our Career and Technology Education (CTE) offerings, including internships and other opportunities for immersing students in the workplace. We are preparing to add a new Agriculture Science Career Academy to meet a community priority and need.

Brendan Iribe, co-founder of Oculus Rift and an Atholton High School graduate, is donating Virtual Reality systems for use by high school students in our Career Academies to learn cutting edge technology and capabilities.

We started the school year by giving resources to our teachers to help them guide balanced, civil classroom discussions about controversial issues.

We are turning to restorative practices, rather than punishments, to help students learn constructive ways to resolve conflicts and overcome hurdles.

- We currently have 28 Howard County teams implementing a variety of restorative practices at their schools. My expectation is for this to be a part of every school culture, so all students can benefit from stronger community relationships that nurture learning.

We are making schools safe harbors for students by standing up for those who are bullied or most vulnerable.

- Bullying has a devastating impact on the victim, and cyberbullying can be especially destructive
- Our children must understand that the decisions they make online could result in a lifetime of negative consequences for everyone involved.
- I have pledged my support to work alongside Christine McComas and fight for children like her daughter who suffer from the wounds that bullying inflicts.

I am empowering teachers to build greater connections with their students and to use their best judgment in handling controversial issues that impact the learning environment.



Security is one of a child's most basic needs. Students must feel safe in order to learn and thrive. I have joined with our Board to issue affirmative statements in support of tolerance and mutual respect following the unrest in Charlottesville, and the recent plan to cancel the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

We have students in our schools whose families live day-to-day in fear of having their family separated. I want every child who comes to our schools to know that they are in a safe haven. I applaud the Board's resolution last week declaring all Howard County schools as "safe zones."

Our children are watching and modeling our behavior, and how we react when others lash out with anger and intolerance. I will not tolerate hate or injustice in our learning community.

Howard County has everything it takes to be a model for preK-12 education in this country. If we can't get it right in Howard County, where can it be done?

We have a tremendous team of educators who possess exceptional passion and skill. Our talented Board of Education members and local government leaders are strongly committed to students and recognize the importance of our school system to county prosperity, today and into the future.

You, our county business community, play an equally critical role. Today, I'd like to ask for your support in three targeted areas.

### **Internships**

- We need to open more opportunities for students to intern with your organizations and learn from your staff. These opportunities make all of the difference in launching students in a career path, and helping them develop the essential skills that lead to lifelong employability.

### **Influence**

- I ask you to lend your influence when funding priorities are established for our state and county budgets. You know the importance of education to your business and to our county vitality.
- Howard County is among the wealthiest communities. Consequently, we do not receive substantial funding from the state.

### **Input**

- We need your expertise and collaboration in identifying the needs and requirements in the current and future workplace. Local leadership has never been as critical as it is today.
- We want your input. We invite you to take an active role in our system, by participating on our advisory committees, and sharing your expertise with students and staff.

Our children are counting on every member of our community to give them the best start in life. They need you, our business and community leaders, to be their hero.

When you think about it, education is truly economic development because we are preparing the next generation of our workforce. Education is economic development at its basic essence.

I value opportunities like today's event, and plan to continue to meet with and hear from our business and government leaders to share our mutual priorities and concerns. We're all in this together. I am excited to collaborate with you over the upcoming weeks and months to ensure a bright and lasting future for education in Howard County.

Thank you.