



# HOWARD COUNTY GOVERNMENT

3430 Courthouse Drive

Ellicott City, Maryland 21043

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January 15, 2019

Dear Board of Education members,

We, along with many other Howard County parents and residents, learned about the details of the Superintendent's FY 2020 Operating Budget proposal of \$998.4 million for the coming year when it was released December 19, 2018. We are excited for us to have a community conversation that leads to improved student-centered practices, increased inclusive relationships, and more responsive and efficient school system operations. We agree that through accountability, alignment and action, we can get there together for all our learners, educators, and families.

The Superintendent's FY 2020 proposal requests an additional \$123 million in County funding, an increase of 20 percent. The requested increase is 8.4 times the average annual growth of the County's direct appropriation to the school system in the past four years. For illustrative purpose, the Superintendent's FY 2020 requested increase is equivalent to a per resident tax increase of \$1,030. Last year's Spending Affordability Advisory Committee urged the school system to understand the limited resources available to the County and "explore internal prioritization, process change and innovative approaches."

The Superintendent and elected county officials have agreed in the past on the importance of evaluating the needs identified in the school system's budget, similar to other county agencies, within the funding realities the County faces. We believe that, to carry out this principle, we must work collaboratively to examine the appropriate data and evidence that will help us make the best decisions for Howard County's children, families, and educators. 'Wants' are important, but 'needs' are critical. To that end we would ask that you consider the following points and *questions* as you work through your budget that you will ultimately present to me. We are asking the same questions of ourselves as we formulate a complete FY 2020 Operating Budget.

## **Operating Budget Total**

The 2017 Operating Budget Review Committee's report emphasized similar approaches focusing on the importance of adopting a strategic plan that contains benchmarks, performance measures, and new revenue-generating opportunities. It also noted the need for improved data collection methods to assess the return on our investments.

*How does the school system's FY 2020 operating budget request utilize strategic planning techniques and performance measures to prioritize need?*

*How many grants has the school system sought and been awarded and for what dollar amounts for each of the last three years? Are they one-time or continuing? How has this revenue been factored into the FY 2020 budget request?*



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*What cost savings measures does the school system plan to implement this year and what impact do you expect them to have?*

The Health Fund shortfall remains a systemic challenge.

*What are the school system's own strategies and action plans to preempt future Health Fund shortfalls as an alternative to using County dollars?*

*Does the school system prioritize eliminating the Health Fund deficit in FY20 over other identified priorities?*

Deferred maintenance is another critical issue that not only speaks to the learning environment, but also to the efficient use of our resources.

*What is the school system's criteria for prioritizing deferred maintenance needs over the coming years?*

*Has the Facilities and Maintenance Committee been reconstituted, and if so, have they evaluated this issue and provided feedback?*

### **Personnel Resources**

The school system's budget predicts a student enrollment increase of 850 students from FY 2019 to FY 2020. This projection aligns generally with the County's expectation. As we determine additional general education staffing needs, we would like to better understand how the enrollment changes are captured in the State funding formula and to what extent we can maximize State support. For example, the enrollment growth we will experience in FY 2020 is comparable to the growth rate of years past, yet the school system's budget request to the State increases by only \$8 million compared to last year's increase of \$11 million. As reflected in your presentation, educator morale is an important variable to consider.

*How significant a factor is class size in determining staffing needs?*

*To what extent do changes to the school system's student/teacher ratio impact student performance?*

*What data can the school system present to paint a clearer picture on attrition and transfers?*

*What are the attrition and transfer rates in Howard County, and how do they compare with comparable systems?*



A strong central leadership team and equitable staff alignment across schools is essential in continuing to make Howard County schools a leader in academic and extracurricular enrichment for all students.

*Has the school system developed a strategic staffing plan? If so, how does it serve as a basis for the school system's proposed staffing plans?*

*What is the structure of the school system's central leadership team? How does the structure and corresponding salaries compare with other Maryland jurisdictions?*

*Has a best practice review of comparable school systems occurred, which could create opportunities to maximize effectiveness and guarantee equity across schools?*

New investments in digital learning technologies can transform the student experience. The Superintendent's budget proposal highlights the areas where these investments would occur.

*Has the school system prepared a fiscal outlook of projected maintenance, replacement, and training?*

*Has the school system established appropriate device/student ratio benchmarks? If so, on what basis was it developed?*

*How do we ensure that teacher training is aligned with the adoption of new technologies so that new equipment is utilized fully?*

*Has there been a communications/engagement plan for families and guardians so that technology competence can be reinforced at home?*

## **School Supports**

Howard County was once known as the model for teaching and learning for children with special needs. The Superintendent's proposal calls for an additional \$9.7 million to fund nearly 280 positions per year.

*Has a needs assessment been conducted for specialized services for students with developmental and intellectual disabilities?*

*How is the school system ensuring that ESY is addressing the goals in each child's IEP? In each of the last three years, how many students that were moved to a less restrictive environment had to be relocated to a more restrictive environment because their needs could not be accommodated?*



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*How many requests were made by parents for multiple IEP meetings in each of the last three school years? What is the process for handling these requests and what are the outcome measures the school system tracks to ensure that parents' requests are handled effectively?*

*How will this increase assure that the school system will be able to educate more of our children in their home schools and how will success be measured?*

Improved school-based mental health supports have been a priority of Howard County for many years. As recent as 2015, the Behavioral Health Task Force called for universal mental health screenings in schools. The County's funding of three social workers in the school system, in addition to pilot money from the Horizon Foundation, enabled the County, the Howard County Health Department, and the Howard County Public School System's Division of Academics, to offer school-based mental health services in 23 schools. This model has proven both cost-effective and responsive to student needs in other jurisdictions. We want to ensure that the \$10 million in new funding the Superintendent is requesting does not duplicate efforts and is weighed against performance data from our existing school-based mental health model.

*How does the staffing model, which includes 126 new positions, complement the existing model?*

*What existing data can be shared regarding the need for additional mental health services in schools beyond what the existing model provides? Do data on chronic absenteeism and existing disciplinary practices factor into the assessment?*

*How does the school system's new wellness/mental health plan leverage existing partnerships and resources in the community and provide coordinated services for students and families?*

*What coordinated efforts have been forged to leverage Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMSHA) and other grant funding to support the school system's model?*

*Is universal screening part of the school system's new wellness/mental health plan?*

*What performance measures is the school system using to evaluate social-emotional learning outcomes?*

*In the school system's opinion, how can the County-funded Mobile Crisis Team better serve the needs of students in crisis?*



### **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

We have shared goals of fostering a culture embracing diversity, equity and inclusion. We want all students to be engaged, achieve, and thrive in an environment that promotes their well-being. The County and the school system have made joint strides to reinforce goals of equity, diversity, and inclusiveness. This partnership has resulted in a series of community building events at schools to build relationships and trust, engage students and staff in dialogue, and foster a sense of school-wide community and inclusiveness. The County also works specifically with teachers/instructors to embedded effective communication skills and practices within curriculum to increase social emotional learning and inclusiveness.

*How does the school system's efforts leverage existing partnerships and resources in the community?*

*What is the school system's plan for restorative practices at schools most in need and how does this plan align with existing County efforts?*

*What are the data around discipline that have informed the school system's plan to ensure equitable discipline practices?*

*How have you analyzed those data points to prioritize resources in this area?*

In conclusion, the discussion points presented above are intended to encourage the school system to prioritize its needs and explore cost-effective strategies to meet service delivery expectations and integrate the system's and county's respective priorities. We are asking similar questions of ourselves as we formulate an FY20 Operating Budget that reflects the needs of residents and infuses innovative strategies to maximize new investments given a tough fiscal climate. If we are to effectively partner to make the best use of all county resources, we must work together toward shared goals. The challenges our respective budgets will address did not occur in a year, and we will not solve these challenges in one year. For us to realize the impact of systemic changes, the road map must be sustainable. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Calvin Ball  
County Executive

Liz Walsh  
Howard County Council, District 1



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Cc: Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Superintendent, Howard County Public School System