

Good evening. My name is Katie Murdza, and I stand before you tonight as an elementary special education teacher, a Howard County resident, and a parent of two HCPSS students. I have experienced school systems across multiple states, but none had the reputation of ours—a reputation built not just on test scores, but on unique programs, quality educators, and a deep commitment to students.

Unfortunately, that reputation is now eroding. Year after year, HCPSS has been forced to cut the very programs, services, and quality educators that made our schools great. We are being asked to do more with less, which means we are not keeping up; **we are actively falling behind**. The reason is simple: the county executive and council have failed to fully fund our public schools. I am asking you tonight to change that and fully fund the Board of Education's adopted budget.

This need is acutely felt in Special Education. Dr. Barnes has committed to desperately needed continuous improvement for our most vulnerable students. Special educators have partnered with the administration to identify best practices, update staffing models and implement appropriate programs required to meet the complex needs of today's students. This is a multi-year process to get to where we need to be. But without full funding each year, I worry that cuts will be made or improvements will be delayed, that will affect this commitment.

We cannot allow our school system to continue making cuts or relying on reckless financial practices—like continuously using 'one time funds' for yearly operational needs, or worse, dipping into critical reserves like the health care fund. This is financially irresponsible when the county has the clear ability to fully fund this budget.

This budget doesn't even restore the staff and programs we've already lost in the last couple of years. We are fighting just to maintain and improve basic, fundamental educational practices. Every cut we make, every program we postpone, is taken directly from our students—the ones who suffer the most.

Our schools are the undisputed heartbeat of this county. Families are still moving to Howard County for our schools, but with the drop in enrollment, many are also leaving. HCPSS is not just producing tomorrow's workforce; we are shaping the adults who will lead our community with compassion and innovation. When we invest in them, everyone wins.

I urge you: **put back the additional funds the county executive omitted**. Fully fund the BOE's budget. Allow HCPSS to use our funds for what they are earmarked for. Our children's future, and the future of Howard County, depends on your decision. Thank you.