

CC Budget Testimony 2026

Howard County Education Association (HCEA)

April 27, 2026 - 5 minutes

I'm Benjamin Schmitt, President of the Howard County Education Association, representing 6,300 educators dedicated to our public school system. I'm joined here and virtually by educators who see the needs of our students accelerate year after year, placing ever-increasing demands on educators, parents, and administrators—while the resources to support them continue to diminish.

Although this year's proposal is better than what we have seen in many years, and is closer to the adopted budget of the BOE, we cannot ignore the impact of staffing cuts over the last several budget cycles. In recent years, HCPSS has been forced to make cuts that have changed the daily experience of school for students and staff. Class sizes have increased. We've lost GT and band/strings positions. We've seen cuts to elementary support staff, especially paraprofessionals, reductions in media para support, cuts to Materials of Instruction, and fewer opportunities for students. Just the cut to elementary media paras alone has triggered a 30% decrease in books being checked out this school year. How can we expect students to read on grade level by third grade if we are taking books out of their hands? These are not abstract line

items. They are the people, services, and opportunities that once made HCPSS stand out.

At the same time, educators are being asked to do more with less. Student needs have grown, workloads have grown, and compensation has not kept pace with other County departments, government offices or inflation. Support staff in HCPSS have fared even worse. That is not just a fairness issue—it is a staffing issue. If we want to recruit and retain the people our students depend on, we cannot continue balancing the budget on the backs of students and staff in the classroom.

That is why “close” is simply not good enough. The current proposal still leaves a gap of \$6.2 million dollars, and expects HCPSS to fill it with fund balance. But when HCPSS uses fund balance for recurring costs, it is borrowing from the next fiscal year. And there is a major difference between HCPSS’s fund balance and that of the County Government: HCPSS cannot generate its own revenue. The County Government can, and much of its fund balance reoccurs year after year. So, expecting the school system to drain its reserves while the County protects its own, is neither fair or sustainable.

The County has the capacity to do more. In Fiscal Year 2027, the County is projected to have \$96 million in new recurring revenue. That does not include

interest income, which was \$42 million at the end of Fiscal Year 2025. This year is also one of the closest years the estimations of the SAAC have come to actual revenues coming in. The issue is not whether resources exist. The issue is how those resources are being prioritized.

Our request is straightforward: fully fund the Board of Education's budget request and close the remaining gap with recurring dollars, or as close as possible. That would be a meaningful step toward ending the cycle of forcing HCPSS to use one-time money for ongoing obligations, creating a debt structure for the system in FY 2028.

Strong public schools are the reason families choose Howard County, and the main driver of property values and the County's tax base. Investing in educators and school staff is not just an educational decision—it is an investment in the County's long-term strength.

We are asking you to make that investment now: protect students, protect staff, protect fiscal health, and build a budget that is honest and sustainable.

Thank you.

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.