SECAC Report to the BOE

 5/3/2018

As usual SECAC has been busy. We continue to have our monthly meetings. I want to thank Ms French for coming out to several including last week’s. We appreciate your input. We held a Special Education Parent Forum last Sunday at Harpers Choice Middle School. We had speakers from the area discussing topics on SMART goals, IEP and Endrew F Supreme Court case on why we need ambitious goals written in IEPs, and we had a speaker on FBAs and BIPs and measurability around behavior. There was a lot of great feedback from parents after the event and hope to do more programming for parent education seminars next school year with our grant money and collaborating with Dr Savage and her team around educational sessions for parents. We met yesterday to discuss our grant report and education forums for special ed parents for next year.

The 20th annual SECAC Recognition evening will be May 10th at Wilde Lake Middle School 7-8:30pm. We have over 325 nominations. We hope you are able to join us that night to celebrate all the work our teachers, support staff, bus drivers, administrators are doing on behalf of students in special education. Thank Michele Im, our Vice Chair for organizing this event.

 SECAC is also hosting a BOE candidate forum, partnering again with HCAS. It will be on May 30th at HCC to interview the candidates around special education subject matter. Our last candidate forum was well attended and we hope to have a lot of community members this year. Finally, we have nominations for electing our next SECAC Board going on right now and the elections will take place in June.

We want to thank Bill Barnes, HCAS and the DSE team for working out the details on the recent draft guidelines re: graduation for students in special ed and giving the community a frame of reference to use when deciding the appropriate time for a student in special ed to walk across the stage. Per the new guideline, students can walk with their peers at age 17/18 as “seniors” and still return to school after they walk for continuing their special education as “Super Seniors” until age 21, if necessary. By not allowing this in the past has caused students to be unable to walk the stage for a graduation ceremony with all their peers they have been in school with from kindergarten-12th grade. So we appreciate the change. We are still concerned and hope the district will consider that there will be students who may want to walk again at age 21 and this is currently not an option. This would celebrate all the work the student, family and staff have done to send the student off into the community, into a job, or post secondary experience. We believe this would be a very small population of students in special ed and ALS but nonetheless, we would like this as an option.

We are also concerned about Jumpstart and the potential needs of students with disabilities who may be moving schools to facilitate their enrollment in one of the programs. I have not seen final numbers of students with IEPs and 504s who are moving from their home school to another school for Jumpstart. We would like data as it relates to this as special educators are tapped out in some schools and we need to ensure, with budget approval, that special educators have what they need for students in Jumpstart.

Additionally, we understand there is a proposed new school report card for 3-5th grade and we want to make sure that the school system is presuming competence for our students and without A/B/C grades, a student may get stuck at a certain place especially in reading or math, be many grade levels behind, and still get passed onto the next grade. We would like further conversation around this with the district to ensure the language supports students with special ed and the training for the staff is synonymous throughout the district. Some of our SECAC members who reviewed the report card felt the information would give better sense of accuracy re: student’s present levels and create opportunities to show strengths and weaknesses as it relates to general ed curriculum but others, including attorney’s had concerns as parents access their Due Process rights that this report card may heighten the risk of passing students with disabilities along and not be consistent to what is seen across the State with letter grades.

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During our February report to the Board, we discussed special education racial breakdowns and Dr. Altwerger and Ms. Ellis requested additional data. We have compiled some of the requested data from MSDE and HCPSS reports. However, some of the requested information is not publicly available. We hope school system staff will provide the information soon, if they have not done so already.

Suspension & diploma graphs – see Powerpoint

As far as data is concerned, SECAC would like to see and discuss individual school suspension data and make this available to the public for review. It is important that this data be de-aggregated to show FARMS, race, and students with disabilities separated out. A full release of information ensures that community members can be involved in this pressing issue and that schools are held accountable for their actions and procedures in restorative practices, implicit bias training, disability training for general educators, and if staff training is working or we need to change course. In addition, our PBIS program has been in effect for 18 years. What data do we have to show its effectiveness? We continue to hear anecdotal evidence about the lack of student and teacher support for this program. For students with disabilities, a much more scientific approach is necessary with a focus on antecedents to behavior and training for all educators to recognize and avoid the antecedents.

We also attended the Thunderhill Elementary discussion about the new ED program being developed for next year. Parents asked very knowledgeable and compassionate questions about how to welcome these new students to their community. However, SECAC has several serious concerns about this program and other ED programs being implemented next year. First, it was stated that this program would consist of both self-contained classrooms and general education inclusion and would have students with both Emotional Disturbance and Autism designations. Students with ED and Autism should not be in a program together. Both require specialized teaching techniques by trained educators. Students with autism benefit from inclusion by learning social skills from peers and could suffer significant regression in a program with students having significant behaviors. Finally, the additional elementary programs will be taking their staff from the 2019 budget for school-based special education, which has only 12 teachers and 22 paras for an estimated 471 student enrollment increase. Not only is special education already understaffed, but with general ed class size increases, we are setting ourselves up for failure. What will happen to related arts classes with no support? Howard High has already eliminated an adaptive PE inclusion class due to the class size increase. We also worry about increased suspensions and achievement gaps based on past history and simply continuing more of the same programs.