



September 28, 2023

**Via Electronic Mail**

Montgomery County Board of Education  
Carver Educational Services Center  
850 Hungerford Drive, Room 123  
Rockville, Maryland 20850  
[boe@mcpsmd.org](mailto:boe@mcpsmd.org)

***Re: Shortage of Special Education Teachers in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)***

Dear Montgomery County Public School Board Members:

As board president of Partnership for Extraordinary Minds (xMinds), a Montgomery County nonprofit dedicated to promoting better instruction and outcomes for autistic students in the county, I am writing to express the deep concern of our organization and constituents about the ongoing and severe shortage of special education teachers in our county.

According to data supplied by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), as of September 18, there were 48 vacancies for special education teachers in the county.<sup>1</sup> Elementary school autism programs have been particularly impacted by the shortage, posing a serious threat to some of the county's most vulnerable children.

The current conditions in MCPS were easily foreseeable, and the county must do what it can to mitigate and address the causes. The shortage of special education teachers is a nationwide problem that has been ongoing for years. The causes underlying the shortage include declining enrollments in teaching programs, difficult working conditions, the increasing number of students requiring services, and most recently, the stresses of COVID and its aftermath.

Each year that special education vacancies remain unfilled is a year that special education students are not being provided with a Free Appropriate Public Education, as mandated

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the postings for full time or long term substitute and paraeducator positions for autism and other special education programs serve low-to-moderate income and historically disadvantaged communities and Title I schools. There are also positions posted for several learning centers and countywide programs dedicated to autistic students.

by law.<sup>2</sup> The disparity between student needs and the county's capacity to address these needs has severely hindered the ability of autistic students to have their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) implemented with fidelity. Furthermore, a lack of well-qualified special education teachers has resulted in IEPs not being adhered to, as well as IEP data not being collected. Consequently, teachers are not able to determine students' present levels and thereby craft appropriate goals and objectives. All of these factors are contributing to significant learning loss and lagging progress among special education students.<sup>3</sup>

The mismatch between education services and student needs is a significant stressor for families and educators. This is a situation no one wants or benefits from. In view of the severity of this shortage, we therefore ask the Board of Education and the Montgomery County Council to urgently identify and pursue concurrent strategies, including the following:

- Accelerate the county's efforts to meet blueprint spending goals, exceeding blueprint spending objectives where fiscally possible.
- Expand the number of universities with which MCPS has links, to increase the pipeline of special education teachers.
- Develop a system to delineate which current special education vacancies are creating the most disruption to teaching and learning, and staff these positions first.
- Develop a differentiated salary pay structure that incentivizes placement of teachers in positions with the greatest need.
- Increase the support available to special educators – including additional staffing to provide aid – to better enable robust data collection and IEP development.
- Facilitate more rapid special education certification by developing more opportunities for teachers and qualified para educators to complete requirements while working at full salary.
- Expand recruiting efforts by sending recruiters to more universities, including those outside Maryland, and using special educators and specialists in MCPS to recruit, since they are best positioned to convey the joys of working with students with significant needs.
- Given that special education teachers have a larger workload than general education teachers, offer financial incentives to attract special education teachers

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<sup>2</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 84 Stat. 175, as amended, 20 U. S. C. §1400 et seq., ensures that children with disabilities receive needed special education services. Under IDEA, states that receive federal funds must furnish a "free appropriate public education" to all children with certain physical or intellectual disabilities."

<sup>3</sup> Research shows statistically significant differences between special education students that are taught reading and math by qualified and trained special education teachers when compared to similarly situated special education peers taught by staff without formal university training in special education. See Li Feng & Tim Sass, *What Makes Special-Education Teachers Special? Teacher Training and Achievement of Students with Disabilities*, 36 *Econ. of Ed. Review* 122 (Oct. 2013), available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775713000873>. Such statistically significant disparities often form the basis of anti-discrimination lawsuits alleging disparate treatment and disparate impact. MCPS should thus take steps to mitigate harm to students and limit unnecessary legal risk to the school system.

to MCPS, and retention bonuses to diminish the loss of experienced special education teachers.

- Until this shortage of special education teachers who work with the most disabled students can be alleviated, MCPS should increase non-public placements.

The Board and volunteers of xMinds welcome an opportunity to dialogue about developing a meaningful, executable plan to address these concerns.

Sincerely,

Nora Dudwick  
Board President  
Partnership for Extraordinary  
Minds (xMinds)  
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<https://www.xminds.org/>

CC:

Dr. Monifa McKnight, MCPS Superintendent  
The Honorable Marc Elrich, Montgomery County Executive  
Montgomery County Councilmembers