August 27, 2020

Harford County Board of Education
102 S. Hickory Avenue
Bel Air, Maryland 21014

Dear Superintendent Bulson and Members of the Board of Education:

We are writing you with serious concerns regarding Harford County Public School’s (HCPS) continuity of learning plan adopted by the HCPS Board earlier this month.

As elected representatives of the Harford County community, we are very concerned that the adopted plan for remote learning fails to meet even the basic educational needs of far too many students. We learned the hard way last spring that the distance learning model does not work for most students and we have heard from countless parents who expressed their frustrations and concerns over the difficulty their children were having. Many students have not opened a textbook since March and extending that arrangement for another semester is unthinkable.

We are also hearing that there will not be enough Chromebooks for all students. Between this lack of equipment and the lack of high-speed internet in large parts of the County, many students will continue to fall further behind. The greatest disadvantage will no doubt fall on the thousands of special needs children, as teachers will be unable to properly fulfill the federally mandated IEPs.

Overcoming these challenges requires that we maximize the availability of in-school learning. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Association of Pediatricians (AAP) have both recommended that schools participate in hybrid modeling this year. They recognize the scientific fact that mental, emotional, and physical health are not limited only to coronavirus prevention.

There is no apparent reason for Harford County to deviate from these CDC and AAP recommendations. County residents have done an incredible job of keeping our COVID-19 numbers consistently low. With a population of 255,441 residents, we have only seen 2,344 cases in Harford County since March. That translates into a .01% infection rate. HCPS must take full advantage of this low infection rate, adopt reasonable measures to protect teachers, students, and parents, and greatly expand opportunities for in-school learning.

We fully appreciate the immense challenges you and the HCPS Board of Education have faced in providing suitable learning environments under the very restrictive and inflexible state mandates for social distancing, masking, cleanliness, etc. We are also mindful of the considerable disadvantages you have had in these most difficult times given the very minimal direction and assistance offered you by the State Board of Education. We are, therefore, also calling on the State Board to take immediate action to provide meaningful and practical standards, directives, guidance, and resources to facilitate maximum in-school learning opportunities.
Over the past five months, we have seen the many creative and innovative ways with which businesses have been able to open and operate safely. We strongly encourage the HCPS Board to revisit their decision and use the same innovative thinking to ensure our students learn at their highest potential.

We propose giving parents a choice as to whether or not they want their child back in school. Those parents who opt for in-classroom instruction can do so. Conversely, those who choose remote learning will be responsible for making sure their children are online during the instruction hours. Offering choices will also help those parents who are struggling to balance their work schedule with their children’s learning schedule.

Teachers should be given the same choice offered to parents as to whether they are to be physically in the classroom teaching or teaching remotely. It would be appropriate for those teachers who opt to go back into the classroom to receive bonus pay.

Again, we understand the seriousness of the situation we are in. However above all, we are parents who want the best for every child in this county, and we strongly encourage the Board to reconsider its decisions on these matters.

Best regards,

cc: Maryland State Board of Education

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Senator J.B. Jennings

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Delegate Mike Griffith

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Delegate Lauren Arikan

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Senator Bob Cassilly

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Senator Jason Gallion

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Delegate Susan McComas

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Delegate Teresa Reilly

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Delegate Kathy Szeliga