

April 17, 2023

## **Board of Education of Harford County Public Business Meeting** *Superintendent's Report transcript*

(MUELLER) Next, we have item H, which is the Superintendent's Report, all on you Dr. Bulson.

(BULSON) Thank you. So, I want to start with sort of typical Superintendent's report items. I do want to congratulate, as many others have, Madina for her election as our incoming student member of the board. It's very exciting, she was here to visit a couple meetings back, correct? yes last meeting oh my gosh seems like it was a while ago. I also want to congratulate Mr. Brogley, from C. Milton Wright for being next year's teacher, or this year's teacher of the year and also of course to congratulate the other four finalists, who are going to be, sort of very busy with us and the way that our teacher of the year finalists always are, supporting our schools and the staff.

But I do have, and I apologize in advance, a slightly longer than normal Superintendent's report tonight because I also want to talk about the budget and we will do, we'll be presenting much more information with regard to the budget coming soon.

But as we all know on Friday, around three o'clock, the county executive released his first budget, and it appears Mr. Cassilly is mortgaging our children's future for political grandstanding. Mr. Cassilly's budget is the worst-case scenario for HCPS; he's clearly shown he does not care about education in Harford County. I certainly hope Mr. Cassilly underestimated the value our community puts on education. So, in his video that he released, Mr. Cassilly said, 'my FY24 budget continues the County's commitment to a high quality of education for our children, it provides the County's full share of funding, as required by the state law.' That statement by itself you know sounds fine. The challenge is, it would have been far easier to understand and frankly more accurate, if he'd said his proposal provides the county the minimum possible/allowable share of funding as required by law. The state has had a law in place for a very long time, to ensure that local jurisdictions don't dramatically cut school system funding. In fact, this year for the first time in the history of the law, since the state had this maintenance of effort requirement in place, the legislature passed legislation at the very end of last year's legislative session, that gave districts a one-time opportunity to reduce the funding to school systems below the previous year's funding levels.

That's never been a challenge for Harford County because we've also gone back historically, and we've had to go quite some distance back, but we haven't found an incident where a county executive actually funded the school system at the minimum allowable level. We've also gone back through our budgets, the easiest to access, the ones we have electronic versions for go back 37 years to 1988. Never during that time has the funding a county executive proposed for the Board of Education to receive, to be less than the previous year. Never has that occurred. Yet, this year Mr. Cassilly's proposed budget is \$19.4 million below what Harford County Public Schools received last year and \$39 million less than what we requested for our current operating budget. Mr. Sewell shared this earlier- when you look at that \$39

million gap, that equates to pretty close to one thousand dollars per student that we're not being funded.

So, how will these cuts that we're about to experience impact the children of Harford County?

Class sizes will increase. There will be more students in the classes; our budget as we've described, 84% salaries, 76% student facing positions. There is no way to make substantive cuts without affecting the number of people serving our students. Now fortunately, we think we can mitigate this to the level where we should be able to make these cuts by dealing with turnover, in other words using vacant positions, so I don't currently see a situation where anyone should be losing a job who has one, but obviously this brings lots of disruption.

We have many more decisions to make. Some other things that I think we can expect to see- we asked for two things in the funding, two new things we sent to the county executive. If you recall, the total amount we asked for, which was between \$19 and \$20 million increase over the previous year, had two things; they had the teacher salary package, and it had the funds to make it so that we did not have to return the athletics participation fees. Now clearly neither of those were funded, so there'll have to be extended discussions about what we can do with regard to the salary package, but that can only be negotiated, that has to be negotiated with our associations and it can only happen after the County Council has ratified their budget so I don't know what the impact will be. But I think it's very likely that we will have to bring back the athletic participation fees so that'll be an impact on students.

Last year we made great strides with the seven percent COLA. That made it competitive for us to hire teachers within this region, but with this setback, with a lower salary package, in the context of a profound teacher shortage nationally and regionally and the fact that particularly our biggest neighbor for hiring, sorry biggest competitor, Baltimore County for hiring, they have made an aggressive change to their starting salaries and in fact this year's budget for them will see an increase for their teachers, so I think that will increase, certainly, competition for our most talented staff.

In tight times, and we know the funding is tight, we don't believe it's as tight as what's been presented, but I would say and I've said this before in other settings, that healthcare workers, law enforcement, educators- in some ways they've taken really the biggest hit in the last few years, in terms of the challenges on the job. And I have no interest whatsoever in, you know, questioning what others receiving you know and suggesting that we should be receiving more at their expense. In fact, in Mr. Cassilly's comments, I believe it was in the news piece this morning, he talked about how important it was, 'to make salary adjustments for our law enforcement, to be very competitive in these days, to keep in mind that we're moving forward salary increases will go towards them and consequently, you know those we serve, we need to allow salaries to encourage good folks to enter this community's workforce and stay with it as a career.' It is very important and I absolutely agree with him' I agree with that whether you're talking law enforcement, health care, or educators. Because our Law Enforcement Officers, this has been a very challenging time for them all so I don't begrudge one cent going there. But you can't just have one of those community services without the other. We need the education and to say that the school system can absorb a cut like this is inaccurate and there will be repercussions.

Now he made some other allegations that I feel I need to address. 'There's way too much money going into the central office where most folks are still working remotely and not into the classroom where teachers are working every day and doing an awesome job for our students and that'll be the priority is the kids and not the administration.' Okay, working remotely. Yes, we have approximately 25 people,

out of the hundreds who are assigned to central office, who work 100% remotely. We have a handful of others who work remotely sometimes. Those who work remotely make it so that we don't have to rent more office space. We were able to, you know, secure efficiencies for this community, for our taxpayers, by being able to use our spaces differently and frankly meeting the current signs of the time and the way things have changed and we're still completely committed to customer service and efficiency.

If you look on page eight of our budget book, I know it's a huge book, it's online, you can find the PDF. Page eight, administrative Services account for 3.1% of our total budget, \$21 million. That's our entire administrative Services budget. Three percent, 21 million dollars; we're looking at a \$39 million cut. The scale doesn't make sense, even if you adjust some things, you're not going to be able to solve this just in one end. And in fact, the State Department of Education tracks school system expenditures, on all different lines, and they have a report which they publish, which you can find on our website called selected financial data. And with regard to administrators or School leadership or school system leadership, because there's a lot of discussion of system leadership, they have two categories, one is Administration and the other is mid-level Administration. In Administration we rank 14th in the state, in mid-level administration we rank 22<sup>nd</sup>. In other words, we have the 14th highest or the 22nd highest remember of 24. If you combine those two expenditure lines and you look at what Harford County Public Schools spends on Administration, we're 24th of 24. The most efficient, least expensive Administration in public education, in the state of Maryland. So, suggesting that we're somehow out of touch or irresponsible is just grossly inaccurate.

That, coupled with the suggestion that school system spending is driving financial challenges in Harford County, which is another leap. I said this when I presented on the budget a few meetings ago- Harford County's percentage of the overall County budget has consistently shrunk, even through full funding the last few years, the percentage that the public schools represent in this County's budget, has gone down. This budget proposal decreases that by another 3%. So again, the suggestions that it's irresponsible spending in the schools that's driving increases or possibly somehow affecting taxpayers, again grossly inaccurate.

So, in addition to the deplorable nature of this particular proposal for HCPS, the impacts to the remainder of the county are also concerning. The proposed budget flat funds our two most important educational partners- Harford Community College and the Harford County library system. Again, they're both flat funded. Parks and Recreation, I believe took approximately a \$700,000 cut. I don't know what their total budget is, but again those three entities, the college, the libraries, Parks and Rec, you know they are the entities in this government that do the most for our children. And when you add that to the record, the unprecedented, the historic cuts to public county schools, it makes for a very clear conclusion that this is a county executive who does not support education and in fact I would challenge anyone to find an elected leader in the state who supports education less.

Soon after we received the message on Friday, I wanted to share a couple things with staff and so we sent a message out, obviously that we were concerned about the proposed budget.

But with that said, we've done a lot of work in the last few years. I think Mr. Sewell referenced this also. For 11 years, ending with the FY20 budget, we cut positions in the school system in order to balance our budget. So, we started every school year, regardless of what was happening with our enrollment, we started every school year with fewer employees than the year before. Which helps explain how we've reached the point of having the 24th of 24 spending in central office because a lot of the cuts ended up there. Now over the last three years we've begun building that back.

One of the things that was supposed, that we had sought to have occur in this budget, was to move some of the positions that we had hired for, positions that we had added, immediately following a pandemic. And there were, I don't remember the number offhand, approximately 100 positions that were to move over from federal stimulus funds into our operating budget.

If I recall correctly, 94 of those positions were student-facing positions; those were positions by people who work directly with students, in classrooms, in front of them.

And those are positions that, right now, we can sustain, many of them, for an additional year, in the federal funds. We were looking to spend those down sort of more quickly and in other ways, but we will carry that a little bit longer. My greatest concern is that this wasn't the year for the crisis. All these federal funds are going to expire next year and we still have positions that are sitting in our operating budget that we do hope to move over, because again these are positions that are in classrooms, facing students, working with students, supporting students in their academic needs.

If we get to next year, because we do have a healthy fund balance, it's not what the county executive announced, but Mr. Sewell went through that pretty clearly, we can use some of that to take us through the crisis this year, but next year, without question, will be the most difficult year we've ever faced budget wise. And if we do not retain some of those funds to help us address this cliff, next year, which I think was arbitrarily created this year, for no good reason, I'm very concerned for for what we will be looking at next year.

And so, again, over the next few days, weeks, the administration will continue working on identifying ways to balance this budget. You know should we have to balance it based on the proposed budget. That being said the County Council still has time to speak and time to work and we really do hope that we can appeal to the Council for help and possibly encouraging some changes to this proposed budget. Again, my goal isn't to take from others in this community. We've been making great progress in all of the areas and so I hope we can find some help from our County Council. So, the process will be that the Council will have budget hearings, opportunities for input, they will obviously have their normal meetings, they will vote to approve a budget; we don't know what final product that will be. After that we have to come back and at this dais, have an opportunity to produce a balanced budget and we have to vote on that balanced budget.

I will make recommendations to the board, about the changes we will make in order to balance that, so the budget will be based on recommendations, and you can vote those thumbs up or thumbs down. And that will be the process we go through; we need to have a balanced budget by June 30th. So, with that I look forward to working with everybody, as we continue to go through this process, we have a lot to work on, a lot of talking to do, but the energy we're about to expend advocating for our kids is essential. And thank you all for working with us and I will see you all at our next meeting, next Monday night.

(END)