

## **African American Community Parent Academy Questions**

### **Advanced/GT Opportunities:**

1. I was contacted by the reading specialist at my child's school about my child being very advanced. I requested testing to determine my child's reading level, but it was not given. No specialist was assigned to my child. How do you make sure your child is getting challenged in the classroom? My child is above grade level, and I addressed this issue with the teacher and reading specialist, but nothing was done.

The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) supports differentiation of instruction to ensure that all students are challenged and engaged in the classroom. Teachers use formative assessments and MAP assessment data to differentiate instruction based on a student's reading ability. This differentiation may include working with the reading specialist but is more commonly accomplished through assignment of more challenging reading material and accompanying assignments. If you feel that your child is not being adequately challenged, please discuss this with the teacher at the parent-teacher conference or at another opportunity. If you feel that the teacher is not able to sufficiently differentiate instruction to challenge your child, please speak with your child's school's administrators.

2. Why does it seem harder for African American students to access GT courses? If our students are straight A students, how are they not suitable for GT? Why does it take extensive advocacy from African American parents to get GT placement for their straight A students?

There are many criteria included as part of the GT placement process at the elementary and middle school levels. In addition to assessment scores, the placement committee considers student work samples that demonstrate high-level performance in the areas of critical and creative thinking rather than focusing solely on the overall quarterly grade. This is because it may be that while a student can earn As on on-grade-level material, they may still struggle with above-grade-level material. HCPSS encourages all parents to share their unique insights into the strengths and interests of their children as part of the placement process. If you feel that your child is demonstrating readiness for one or more GT classes, please discuss this with the school's GT Resource Teacher or administrator.

3. a. Is there an opportunity to adjust GT levels in HS?

In order to provide opportunities for a greater percentage of students to have the opportunity to take GT and AP courses, HCPSS has eliminated many prerequisites to these courses, except in cases where a prior course is necessary and a part of a natural sequence, such as in Mathematics, Fine Arts, and World Languages. Therefore, students do not need to have taken GT-level courses prior to high school in order to challenge themselves with AP and other rigorous courses. If your student feels they are prepared for more rigorous courses, they, or you, should speak with their guidance counselor.

b. Is it the HCPSS's position that on-grade level classes do not adequately prepare our children for college?

On-grade level classes meet the Maryland College and Career-Ready Standards, which are aligned with national standards. However, HCPSS encourages its students to take more rigorous courses, particularly at the high school level where GT and AP courses provide them with a closer approximation of college coursework, while still maintaining the more supportive high school environment.

4. What are the expectations for flexible grouping at the various school levels so that students have access to upper level curricula?

Differentiation of instruction occurs within elementary and middle school classrooms through groupings based on student strengths and academic needs. These groupings may occur within a class or through placement in a GT-level course in order to provide each student with the appropriate level of challenge and rigor. Student placement in advanced groups or in GT-level classes may occur throughout elementary and middle school as students demonstrate readiness for more rigorous coursework. At the high school level, students may opt to enroll in GT and AP courses if they feel that they are ready and have discussed their options with their guidance counselor. The HCPSS aims to create a K-12 environment where there are many opportunities for students to receive personalized instruction and engage in challenging, above-grade level coursework.

## **Special Education**

5. Is there a disproportion level of spending on special education? I heard that 40-60% of school resources (teachers) are there for a small percentage of student population. What can be done to reverse this trend to make a more balanced allocation of funds?

While special education services do represent additional costs, these costs are not 40-60% of school resources; special education represents approximately 15% of the FY16 Budget. It is the legal duty of the HCPSS to ensure that all students receive a free and appropriate public education. As such, the HCPSS also receives funds from various federal and State sources to support special education. Beyond ensuring that students with special needs receive the same standard of education as their peers, the HCPSS believes that inclusion of students receiving special education services in the general classroom environment to the greatest extent possible benefits all students. Special education personnel are highly trained educators who are able to share their expertise on differentiating instruction, universal design for learning, and utilizing technology to personalize instruction to the benefit of all students.

6. Are teachers really aware of the IEP requirements at the beginning of the year or is it best for a parent to contact them and make them aware of what is in the IEP?

A student's case manager is responsible for sharing IEP goals, classroom accommodations and modifications, services, and any other information pertinent to the student's education with the classroom teacher(s). However, communicating with your child's teacher about his/her IEP and expectations for the school year is also encouraged, although not required. The HCPSS supports parents in advocating for their child's education and know that parents often have unique insights that will aid teachers in instruction.

## **Students' Rights and Responsibilities and Discipline**

7. I hear about "due process," but it seems to just be a checkbox to ensure that the student's side of the story is captured. The HCPSS is assumed to be right. Do our children need the equivalent of a union to be treated fairly? Where is their protection?

The HCPSS takes seriously students' legal right to due process. The HCPSS Student Handbook (<http://www.hcpss.org/f/aboutus/student-handbook/student-handbook.pdf>) discusses students' rights and responsibilities (Policy 9020) and student discipline (Policy 9200). The policies can be found online at <http://www.hcpss.org/board/policies/9000-series/>.

The HCPSS believes students must be provided the opportunity to excel in a safe and supportive environment. Students are supported in exercising their rights and responsibilities as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others or a school's ability to provide a safe and supportive environment. Students are responsible for making decisions with integrity and assuring their actions are aligned with the HCPSS Student Code of Conduct (<http://www.hcpss.org/f/board/policies/codeofconduct13-14.pdf>). If you feel that your child was disciplined unfairly or that their version of events was not given proper weight, please contact your student's teacher and/or administrators and advocate for your child.

8. When staff are disciplined, I've seen them moved to other schools or to Central Office. How is that discipline? There are clearly defined consequences for students and parents, but what about consequences for HCPSS staff?

Staff members are held to a high standard of conduct. The HCPSS supports staff in exercising their rights and responsibilities and provides them with legally required due process as outlined in the Policy 7030 Employee Conduct and Discipline (<http://www.hcpss.org/f/board/policies/7030.pdf>) and the appropriate negotiated agreements (<http://www.hcpss.org/employment/agreements-and-salaries/>). If an employee fails to perform their duties in a professional manner, they are placed on action plans and may face termination. Where staff face allegations that compromise their ability to educate children in a safe and supportive environment, they are removed from the classroom while facts are gathered and disciplinary decisions are made. This is why teachers are sometimes temporarily relocated to Central Office or given other duties.

9. Why are students placed at Cedar Lane and Homewood?

Placement decisions are made to provide students with the best-matched learning environment given their strengths and needs. Cedar Lane serves students with special education needs that cannot be adequately met at their home school, while the Homewood Center houses distinct programs, each designed to meet the specific needs of individual students who have difficulty in traditional classroom settings.

10. What efforts are being implemented to preemptively address the higher levels of expulsions and punishments for students of color?

The HCPSS recognizes that students from certain groups (African American students, male students, students receiving special education services, students who receive Free and Reduced-Price Meals) are over-represented in suspension rates and other measures of student discipline. Staff members have participated in cultural proficiency professional learning opportunities that help them to identify why students from certain groups may be over-referred for discipline and provide ways that teachers and administrators can minimize bias. Efforts are being made to proactively prevent the need for such discipline through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is based on the belief that students should be taught expected behaviors instead of assuming students know what is expected. It promotes: 1) addressing behavior positively and proactively, rather than reactively; 2) actively supervising and precorrecting for problematic behaviors, especially in non-classroom settings; and 3) individualizing support based on students' responsiveness and demonstration of positive behaviors. Schools also rely on their crisis teams and implementation of restorative practices such as peer mediation, conflict resolution programs, and social-emotional learning. Central Office staff continue to work with school administrators to provide discipline options that minimize the use of suspensions.

## Communication with Teachers

11. Why are middle school teachers given the option to post or not to post class information (e.g., homework, upcoming tests) on the school's website in a central location. It makes it extremely difficult for parents to partner with the teacher when this information is not readily available.

Beginning this school year (August 31<sup>st</sup>), all teachers will be required to create pages on Canvas. At the secondary level, teachers are encouraged to use their page for sharing assignments as well as grades. At the elementary level, teachers are to post general activities and curricular content, but are not required to post grades this year. However, online access to your students' grades will be available through Synergy. The timing and manner in which grades and other academic reports are shared are covered by Policy 8010

(<http://www.hcpss.org/f/board/policies/8010.pdf>), for students K-8, and Policy 8020 (<http://www.hcpss.org/f/board/policies/8020.pdf>), for high school students.

12. Does the HCPSS set a timeframe for how long it can take teachers to respond to parent or community questions? Is there a set maximum time for teachers to answer questions?

The HCPSS encourages parents and teachers to partner in order to maximize student success. It is recognized that family members have unique insights into students' strengths and needs that can enhance personalization of instruction. Teachers are encouraged to respond to parent communications in a timely fashion, although there is currently no specific timeframe requirement. Communications about how grades and other academic reports are shared are covered by Policy 8010 (<http://www.hcpss.org/f/board/policies/8010.pdf>), for students K-8, and Policy 8020 (<http://www.hcpss.org/f/board/policies/8020.pdf>), for high school students. If you feel that a teacher is not being adequately responsive to your communications, please try to set up time to meet or speak with that teacher or, if they are not making themselves available, then the administration of your child's school.