

Good evening Dr. Ball. My name is Kelly Klinefelter, I live in Columbia, and I am the president of the Howard Progressive Project and the co-chair of the Living Wage Howard County Coalition. I am also a Baltimore City Schools teacher, a member of the Baltimore Teachers' Union, LOCAL 340, AFT, AFL-CIO, and a proud Swansfield, Harper's Choice, and Wilde Lake parent. I am here this evening to urge you to fully fund the HCEA negotiated agreements, which provide over \$40m in compensation increases for educators and staff.

Howard Progressive Project's central organizing principle is community. We envision a more just and equitable Howard County, a place where every person can grow to their fullest potential.

This includes, most urgently, our children.

It need not be said that our community's children are our most precious resource. They are the best of us – all that is new and possible – and each of us wants what is best for our children. Ask around and you will hear that people move here, often at great cost, for the chance for their children to attend our public schools. As parents, we want this system because of its lasting commitment to music and arts, to physical fitness and athletics, to outdoor education, to enrichment, to inclusion, to STEM education, to career academies. We want and we demand, as we rightly should for our children, excellent educational programming.

But for too long, we have underinvested in the people who work in our schools. We have built a system in which we expect our educators and support personnel to work for salaries that don't provide for their basic needs, that don't provide for their families, that don't allow them to live in our community, and that don't make our district competitive with other districts in Maryland.

The most important people in a school building are the students. Schools exist to serve them and their social, emotional, and academic learning needs. Every adult in the building must come to work every day ready to meet each child where they are, with empathy and understanding.

This has always been demanding work, and it is especially difficult now as our children face unprecedented learning, behavior, and mental health challenges after two years of pandemic-related school interruptions and alterations.

Surely the food service workers who prepare and serve our students their breakfast and lunch each day deserve a wage that honors their hard work. We're grateful to the County Council and you, Dr. Ball, for passing and signing CB82-2021. Because of that bill, food service workers negotiated a \$15 starting wage beginning in the 2022-23 school year. It's great to see the ripples of that movement in our community.

The folks who spend the most time with our children, of course, are their teachers. And I say this as a teacher myself – our educator corps is in crisis. Teachers are retiring and

changing professions in numbers not seen before the pandemic. And education programs are seeing severe declines in enrollment. An *Education Week* survey from October 2021 reported that 48% of administrators struggled to staff classrooms last fall.

There are vacancies in our schools now, midyear, leaving students not getting what they need.

Under these circumstances, competition to hire qualified teachers is going to be fierce. Our goal in Howard County should continue to be to provide the very best educational system for our children, and that must start with staffing our schools with the very best people. And that requires investment.

Let's commit to recruiting the very best educators in the state by meeting the challenge of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and fund the HCPSS budget so that our teachers have a starting salary beyond the \$60,000 minimum.

And let's commit to retaining the very best educators in the state by raising the salaries of all of our teachers. Our experienced teachers are the foundations of our school buildings and serve as invaluable mentors to our new teachers. Let's fully fund the HCEA negotiated agreements.

Let's commit to increases in critical staffing and support for student mental health.

Howard Progressive Project and Living Wage Howard County are proud to stand tonight in solidarity with our HCEA brothers and sisters and with every one of our Howard County students in saying this: invest in our educators and school staff so they can invest in our kids.