

Good evening, Dr. Ball. My name is Kelly Klinefelter, and I am the president of Howard Progressive Project and a resident of Columbia. Our 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. With access to our schools, our beautiful outdoor spaces, our top-notch health care system, our rich variety of cultural institutions, every person can seize their dream and thrive.

But not everyone has the same access to our community's bounty. And that's in part because in this place that is so great for so many, we have vast disparities in our public schools.

Last week the Maryland State Department of Education published their Report Cards.

Many of our schools show excellent results.

But we have 12 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, and 3 high schools in the bottom 50% of all schools in the state of Maryland. Of these 12, three of our elementary schools and two of our middle schools are in the bottom third of all Maryland schools.

This should give us pause, because these numbers are our collective responsibility. They are our collective policy choices coming to fruition. In this community, where we claim to value education and our children, we make policy decisions that leave some students behind while we empower others to thrive.

When you dig into the MSDE data, you learn that schools scoring in that bottom half, and even more so in the bottom third, have lots of students who struggle with chronic absenteeism and housing instability.

As a teacher, let me share this with you – students who are not reliably in school struggle to keep up on their learning. They miss that academic, social, and emotional magic that happens in the classroom between students and teachers, and this simply cannot be replicated with packets or online make-up work.

For too long, we've been deciding that the packets and the online make-up work is enough, and that the problems at home are the purview of the students' parents. That their children's food

instability is adequately addressed by the granola bars and juice boxes we hand out for breakfast and the mediocre meals we serve for lunch. We count on our frontline workers, many of whom pay half their take home pay in rent, some of whom don't yet speak English, to help their children catch up on their schoolwork, while some of those same children work nights and weekends to help the family pay their bills.

And this is how we get these results – 20 Howard County schools in the bottom half of Maryland's schools.

I'm here tonight to ask you, Dr. Ball, to take steps in your budget to address these results, because they can be addressed with the appropriate resources:

First, because we face a dire shortage of educators, we are competing with every other county in the State of Maryland to hire and retain teachers. Our current status as the sixth highest paying district in Maryland means failure in this environment. If we want a qualified teacher in every classroom, we need to get on track to be the highest paying school district in the state.

Second, we must immediately fund extra services at our struggling schools, services that make school both irresistible to our students who struggle to attend and a source of resources that address some of the needs that make school attendance challenging in the first place. Educators know what works – smaller class sizes, district funding of restorative practices, after school interventions and activities, wraparound services, expansion of PreK. We cannot continue to neglect our most vulnerable students by offering a one-size-fits-all school model to students who need something more. It's time for us to take bold steps into a future where we provide every child the education they need.

Third, our vulnerable students need educators who are ready to meet them where they are with empathy and expertise. We must invest in further development of our educator corps to work with our most vulnerable kids.

We have so much to be proud of in Howard County and this magnificent community that we create for children. But it's time for us to consider –

Are we comfortable with the policy choices, the budget choices, that we've made in the past, that have given us these very disparate results? Are we satisfied with leaving this many of our students' potential unrealized?

Or are we called to invest in our schools and allocate County funds to build schools that meet the needs of all our kids?

Thank you for considering this when you finalize your budget.