

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 year when I testified in this hearing, I spoke to you about MSDE scores, scores that are based on academics, attendance, and climate data. Sadly, our county is still home to three two-star schools per the MSDE data. This is what's behind those two out of five star rankings:

- Chronic student absenteeism
- Concentrated student needs in the wake of pandemic learning loss
- Higher numbers of inexperienced teachers
- Concentrations of poverty because of housing segregation

As a parent, educator, and activist, these school ratings alarm me, especially because my son was a student in a two-star middle school for three years and I saw the exodus of staff from that school year after year and heard daily from my son about the challenges inside his classrooms and hallways.

The existence of our two-star schools – inadequately staffed and supported – should alarm us all, 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. We make policy choices to empower some school faculty and staff to struggle mightily every day, while we empower others to thrive.

When you consider that these schools who are so desperately in need of more support are facing cuts this bleak budget year, I don't know what to think.

As we consider this year's budget, we must consider both the short and the long term.

In the short term, we must remember that our students have one chance at a K-12 education. Are we willing to balance this budget on the backs of our most vulnerable children in our struggling schools? Their needs are already unmet; how will they do with less – with bigger classes, with fewer supports?

And in the long term, we need to work together, all of us – the public, the council, the board of education, you – to both prioritize significant structural changes to revenue and stimulate financial growth. The public does not accept this bare bones budget, and neither do we. Our children need and deserve better.

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 behind this many of our students' with unrealized potential?**

Or are we called to increase our investment in our schools through new revenue sources and an increased allocation of County funds to provide schools that meet the needs of all our kids? In one of the wealthiest counties in the country we have the resources to fully fund our schools. Not doing so is a choice. It's past time that we stop making that choice. The moment for bold leadership and community collaboration is NOW. Let's work together to build the schools that are worthy of our children and their limitless potential.

Thank you for considering this when you finalize your budget.