

TESTIMONY OF TOM JONES TO MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION OPEN FORUM

September 17, 2009

Madam President, Members of the Board of Education and staff:

I speak in the interest of our present and future special needs populations---and in behalf of our whole society which can benefit the immeasurable rewards, or suffer the devastating consequences, which these future adults can be to our society, depending on our positive response, or lack thereof, to facilitate the potential contributions of our special kids.

I bring to you Some Expectations which must be fulfilled if we are to be successful. Please take them seriously. These are keys to literally thousands of lives, now and yet to come. Leaders of three groups: M.C.I.E., Partnerships for Extraordinary Minds, and USSE developed the paper. It has been shared with at least twelve special education groups, key political decision makers, special educational specialists, and other individuals who have had opportunity to respond. To date, not a single objection has been raised for these expectations being the valid focus for us all. I am convinced there now is consensus among special education groups and persons.

Here is a road map by which we all ought to work together: Board, staff, parents, teachers, specialists, and others to provide the unique, sensitive, extra support needed to facilitate our so-called "special kids" to achieve their potentials for independent, productive, fulfilled lives.

We plead with you, our MC BOE, to study this one page road map; to adopt it; and to begin to lead us all to "live into" these expectations in ways that in decisions made, programs implemented, goals set, long-range plans formed, and budgets approved there will be care that all is consistent with, and advances these principles.

These special kids did not choose to have the daily struggles and challenges to climb the uphill steeps they must overcome. But they can, and will, succeed, if only we all will hang with them to facilitate their growth toward their unique capacities for productive, satisfying, mostly independent lives.

Our trust in you is that, especially in setting budgets in tough times, you will not yield to the political temptation to cut services where there are the fewest votes, or the quietest voices, or the least clout, but that you will stand with courage for what is morally right, especially for the most vulnerable for whom we need to facilitate full life.

Three minutes does not permit me to read aloud the **Expectations for Special Education in Montgomery County and the State of Maryland**. May you not be able to sleep tonight until you have read them! May you get up tomorrow eager to achieve them!

SOME EXPECTATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION
IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY AND STATE OF MARYLAND

- There should be mandatory specialized training for MCPS staff in differentiating instruction (Universal Design for Learning); positive behavioral supports; disability awareness; federal statutes including IDEA, NCLB, and Section 504 as they pertain to the rights and responsibilities of parents, students, and staff; and ongoing teacher training in identifying and supporting students with special needs.
- Many students with disabilities can be satisfactorily educated in the general education classroom with appropriate supports to make meaningful educational progress. These supports include level of staffing, teacher training, Universal Design for Learning, and Positive Behavioral Support.
- In all instances, placement decisions should be solely focused on the individual needs of the student. The placement must be an environment that is determined to be most appropriate for that individual.
- The continuum is required by law to address the needs of those students who can't be educated satisfactorily in the general education classroom even with use of supplementary aides and services.
- There is a need for smaller inclusive classrooms by students who are unable to succeed in classrooms with a large number of students.
- There always will be students who require self-contained classrooms. These classrooms must have enough "critical mass" of peers and teachers qualified in both special education and subject curriculum to create a learning community.
- Students should not be moved off the diploma track and into alternate state assessments and LFI programs due to the dissolution of the Learning Centers.
- MCPS must do all that is required by IDEA and the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) in developing and implementing every IEP, and staff must be trained specifically to understand and be in compliance of these laws.
- Families must be guaranteed meaningful participation as a team member in the IEP process through state and federal laws. MCPS must ensure that families are included as valued and equal partners at every level.
- There must be appropriate testing of students who have IEP's in ways which special students comprehend, and by which they can adequately respond. Students with learning disabilities should not be required to fail tests before being granted opportunity to show accountability toward high school diplomas. Waivers and special accommodations such as performance assessments, portfolios, and bridge programs without prior HSA's and county written tests, and the like, must be made available.