

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

August 1, 2018

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education
From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools
Subject: Special Education Concerns (06-25-18-02)

Question

Mrs. Smondrowski requested information regarding the special education concerns as referenced in Ms. Higgins' testimony, especially the size of special education classes. Mrs. Smondrowski also requested that this information be shared with the community.

Response

The location of services for students with disabilities is reflected on the service page of each student's Individualized Education Program. The data regularly are monitored. When special education services are provided to a student more than 80 percent of the time in the general education setting (Least Restrictive Environment [LRE]-A), students are included in the general education staffing allocation. Typically, LRE-A students do not participate in a self-contained program. However, it should be noted that several LRE-A students are part of a self-contained program, which is the case for several students who attend Westbrook Elementary School. Students in a self-contained program are included in the count for special education staffing that a school receives.

Staff members at Westbrook Elementary School have expanded general education opportunities for students in the Social and Emotional Support Services (SESS) program. Staff in the offices of School Support and Improvement, the Chief Academic Officer, and the Chief Financial Officer will continue to work with the school to ensure that classrooms are within the class-size guidelines, balanced in terms of support when students in the SESS program are in general education classes, and that all students are receiving educational services in the least restrictive environment. We want to provide enriched learning experiences for all students, with manageable classroom sizes and in appropriate educational settings. This information is being shared with the Westbrook Elementary School community (Attachment).

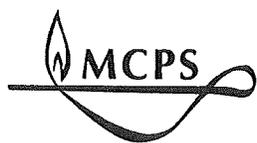
If you have any questions, please contact Mrs. Diane D. Morris, area associate superintendent, Office of School Support and Improvement, at 240-740-3100.

JRS:KAS:MVN:DDM:eaw

Attachment

Copy to:

- Dr. Navarro
- Dr. Statham
- Dr. Zuckerman
- Mr. Civin
- Dr. Johnson
- Ms. Diamond
- Mrs. Morris
- Mr. Turner
- Mr. Ikheloa



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
 MARYLAND

www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org

August 2, 2018



Dear Westbrook Elementary School Parents/Guardians:

As director of learning, achievement, and administration for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), supporting Westbrook Elementary School, I have been asked by Dr. Jack R. Smith, superintendent of schools, to respond to your testimony of June 25, 2018, before the Montgomery County Board of Education (Board). In your testimony, you requested that the Board clarify that special education students participating in general education classes in elementary schools be counted as students in that classroom for purposes of determining whether or not those classes comply with the Board's class size guidelines.

Let me express our appreciation for your support for all children through advocacy and participation. This facilitates our mission as a school system to create collaborative partnerships with our parent/guardian and community stakeholders. MCPS is committed to an organizational culture that furthers our core values of Learning, Relationships, Respect, Excellence, and Equity.

The location of services for students with disabilities is reflected on the service page of each student's Individualized Education Program. The data regularly are monitored. When special education services are provided to a student more than 80 percent of the time in the general education setting (Least Restrictive Environment [LRE]-A), students are included in the general education staffing allocation. Typically, LRE-A students do not participate in a self-contained program. Students in a self-contained program are included in the count for special education staffing that a school receives.

Staff members at Westbrook Elementary School have expanded general education opportunities for students in the Social and Emotional Support Services (SESS) program. Staff in the offices of School Support and Improvement, the Chief Academic Officer, and the Chief Financial Officer will continue to work with the school to ensure that classrooms are within the class-size guidelines, balanced in terms of support when students in the SESS program are in general education classes, and that all students are receiving educational services in the least restrictive environment. We want to provide enriched learning experiences for all students, with manageable classroom sizes and in appropriate educational settings.

Thank you for the opportunity to address your concerns regarding the staffing and class-size guidelines for special education students participating in general education classes in elementary schools. We appreciate your advocacy. It is my sincere wish that your children continue to have a positive and productive school experience in MCPS.

Sincerely,

Eric A. Wilson
 Director of Learning, Achievement,
 and Administration

Office of School Support and Improvement

850 Hungerford Drive, Room 100 ♦ Rockville, Maryland 20850 ♦ 301-315-7377

June 22, 2018

Montgomery County Board of Education
Montgomery County Public Schools Superintendent Jack R. Smith
850 Hungerford Drive
Rockville, MD 20850

Re: Application of The Board of Education's Class Size Guidelines in Schools
Hosting Special Education Cluster Programs

Dear President Durso, Vice President Evans, Ms. Dixon, Ms. Docca, Ms. O'Neill, Ms. Ortman-Fouse, Ms. Smondrowski, and Mr. Post, and Superintendent Smith:

We are parents of students at Westbrook Elementary School, representing both general education students and students in the Social and Emotional Support Services (SESS) program. We are writing *together*, jointly seeking a positive change for *all* students at Westbrook. *Specifically, we ask that the Board clarify that special education students participating in general education classes in elementary schools must be counted as students in that classroom for purposes of determining whether or not those classes comply with the Board's class size guidelines.*¹

Westbrook Elementary is a host school for the county's SESS program, which provides support for students experiencing social, emotional and behavioral challenges.² The goal of the SESS program is for SESS students to receive instruction in the Least Restrictive

¹See Michael A. Durso & Larry A. Bowers, *Investing to Reduce Class Size and Close the Achievement Gap* (May 25, 2016), <http://news.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/mcps-board-of-education/investing-to-reduce-class-size-and-close-the-achievement-gap/>.

² See Sandi I. Posner, *Westbrook Parent Presentation, slide 2 (March 13, 2018)*, http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/schools/westbrookes/principal/Westbrook_Parent_Training_March2018.pdf.

Environment (LRE) feasible in light of each individual student's needs — in other words, to be included in a mainstream classroom as much as possible.³

Consistent with this goal, Westbrook's SESS students are mainstreamed into general education classrooms for varying amounts of the school day. Some SESS students join their mainstream classmates for one or two periods a day. Others may spend most of the academic day in their general education class, thus meeting the LRE-A definition of spending 80% or more of their day in general education.⁴ Some even spend their *entire* day with their mainstream classmates, going to the SESS program classroom to check in and out at the beginning and end of each day. As each individual student progresses towards the goal of full inclusion, he or she can be expected to spend more and more time with his or her mainstream classmates.

Nevertheless, when MCPS implements the Board's class size guidelines, it pretends that Westbrook's SESS students simply are not in their mainstream classes. In counting the number of students in an elementary school class, and determining whether classes are too large, SESS students — regardless of the amount of time they actually spend in general education — are counted as a "zero." The result is that in reality, elementary school classes exceed the class size guidelines established by this Board.

For example, the Board's class size guidelines provide a ceiling of 29 students per class for Fourth Grade.⁵ At Westbrook in the 2017-2018 school year, there were two Fourth Grade classes. Based on the information we have gathered, one of these classes included 26 general education students and 3 SESS students — a total of 29. The other class included 27 general education students and 5 SESS students — a total of 32. Even if the SESS students had been evenly distributed, both classes would have exceeded the class size guidelines. Some of these SESS students were mainstreamed for all subjects, meaning that these overcrowded conditions persisted throughout the school day.

Westbrook's First Grade classes were even farther over the Board's guidelines. The Board's guidelines provide for First Grade classes of up to 27 students per class. At Westbrook in the 2017-2018 school year, there were two First Grade classes. One of the classes included 27 general education students. The other class included 25 general education students and 7 SESS students — a total of 32. As with Fourth Grade, even if these SESS students had been distributed evenly, both classes would have been over the class size guidelines. And much as with Fourth Grade, some of these SESS students were

³ See Posner, *supra*, slide 2; see also *Definitions and Data Sources*, (defining Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)), http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/sharedaccountability/specialglance/DEFINITIONS_2015.pdf.

⁴ See *Definitions and Data Sources*, *supra* (defining LRE-A).

⁵ See Durso & Bowers, *supra*.

included in their mainstream classes for most of the day. Moreover, because SESS students are almost always mainstreamed for special subjects, such as art, music, and physical education, these oversized First and Fourth Grade classes carried over from the academic classroom into these classes as well.

The explanation for overcrowded elementary school classrooms such as these has been that because there is supposed to be a SESS para educator supporting the general education classroom when SESS students are mainstreamed, these students need not be counted in the class total. This explanation ignores the different roles of the classroom teacher and the SESS para educator. The general education classroom teacher (as well the teacher of a “special” such as art or music) is responsible for the planning, instruction, and grading for *all* of the students in his or her classroom. The SESS para educator is not there to provide that instruction. Rather, the para educator is there to support the *additional* needs of the SESS students in the class, which go beyond the instruction that the general education teacher is responsible for providing for all of the students. For example, the SESS para educator may assist a student experiencing difficulty working collaboratively with peers on a group project, or may help a student identify when he or she is becoming frustrated, so that the student can use strategies to process that frustration. The SESS para educator does not lessen the teaching responsibilities of the classroom teacher or specials teacher when it comes to the SESS students in the classroom; rather, the para educator is there to try to ensure that the *additional* needs of the SESS students can be covered.

Moreover, this explanation also ignores the physical space limitations in a classroom, as the fact that SESS students are accompanied by additional personnel only increases the crowding in the classroom.

The end result is that our elementary school general education teachers remain responsible for instruction to a class that is too large in a classroom that is too crowded. Quite simply, class size matters, as this Board recognized when issuing class size guidelines.⁶ Smaller classes mean more individual attention to students’ learning, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to learn and succeed. By contrast, when classrooms are overcrowded, *all* of the students — both SESS and general education students alike — suffer.

For all of these reasons, we ask that the Board make clear that in determining the size of an elementary school “class” for purposes of the Board’s class size guidelines, *all* special education students who participate in that class must be counted. We look forward to discussing these issues at the Public Comment portion of the Board’s meeting on June 25, 2018.

⁶ See *Durso & Bowers, supra*.

Sincerely,

Westbrook Elementary School Parents

cc: Philip A. Lynch, *Director, Montgomery County Public Schools Special Education Services*
Sandi I. Posner, *Supervisor, Montgomery County Public Schools Social and Emotional Support Services Program*
Karen Cox, *Principal, Westbrook Elementary School*