

Carol DeSoto

From: Kristin Hower <khower@ccboe.com>
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To: Public Record
Subject: Fully Fund CCPS!

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County Commissioner,

Good Morning,

My name is Kristin Hower. I'm an occupational therapist working in the county with the Infants & Toddlers Program and also as one of the two founding members of the Central Mealtime Team. I was hired 13 years ago by Lynn Schulte at the Board of Education. Ms. Schulte specifically sought me out from Prince Georges County Schools because she was aware I led a team of therapists in creating a Central Mealtime Team to provide comprehensive services and documentation for students from birth to 21 who were unable to safely purchase and consume school lunches. This team currently consists of 3 therapists who already have full time caseloads in other programs/schools in the county. We currently have 70 students in the county who have a written document (called a Mealtime Plan of Care - MPOC) in their IEP which details how their food must be prepared (e.g., pureed, mashed, diced) in order for them to be able to safely consume it without choking. Each of these students with a MPOC also requires services from someone on the CMT. This CMT member must assess the child regularly, train school staff and cafeteria workers of food prep and attend IEP meetings. All of this is done ABOVE AND BEYOND our full time caseloads in our other job capacity. There are currently 70 students in the county on a MPOC. There are additional students without a MPOC who require CMT monitoring. Currently we are working with the Board of Education to create a full time position for the CMT. Because we saw a need to protect students and the schools, we created and continue to provide support which requires us to do paperwork late into the afternoons after work and/or at home at night and on the weekends when we are not paid.

In my full-time position as an occupational therapist for the Infants & Toddlers Program, I go into family's homes to provide supportive intervention which reduces the strain on families

who are often dealing with multiple medical appointments and the psychological and financial stress which come along with having a developmentally delayed infant. The Infants & Toddlers Program continues to grow in numbers as our county continues to expand and myself and other providers are stretched to capacity to provide services to caseloads that are too large to manage. As a related service provider, I do not get a "substitute" to cover my caseload when I am sick or I take a day of leave. This adds an additional burden of stress for me as I am required to "make up missed home visits" when I am off work which means I now have to try to squeeze an additional 5-10 student visits (including travel time between homes) into an already packed calendar. Because we are on the road more often than we are in the office, everyone on our team uses our personal cell phones to maintain up-to-date contact with parents who may need to cancel our visit early in the morning because their child is sick. Cell phones and unlimited data are ridiculously expensive and those fees come out of our own salaries. Parents often text us at night and on the weekends as well so we are always "on call". Finally, both myself and my colleagues often purchase toys and other needed items (often from thrift stores to save money) for our neediest families to assist them in making developmental progress. Our teams do all of these things mentioned above because we love our students and families and we love our community. We are a caring and committed bunch.

With the recent COVID crisis, we are working from home and doing virtual WebEx coaching sessions with families. There have been daily changes and a steep learning curve to use new technology to reach our families. Technology and connectivity are not equitable among families. Families in the Infants & Toddlers Program were not offered laptops. They are using their cell phones for virtual meetings and in some cases, only receiving phone calls.

The Board of County Commissioners has historically provided solid funding for the students and employees of the Charles County Public School system, and I'm appreciative that my commitment to a quality education for every child is echoed by our elected officials. As a therapist, having the resources I need to effectively do my job ensures that every student in our community can be a success.

To continue that vision together, I ask that you fully fund the Superintendent's budget request for the upcoming fiscal year. Now, more than ever, we've seen the impact that public education has on our community, and we need to make sure that every resource is at our disposal to maximize the education and services we provide to the students and residents of Charles County.

I know that the current times are challenging for many, but I also know that the longer-term vision of what Charles County is, and can be, is important in moving through – and beyond – the current crisis. We start to fulfill a positive vision, together, when we put resources where they are most needed. Fully fund CCPS to show that you, too, are for our students.

#EACC4OurStudents

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