



HOWARD COUNTY
EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Benjamin Schmitt, President
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Sarai Gray, Treasurer
Julia Carter, Secretary

5082 Dorsey Hall Drive, Suite 102 Ellicott City, MD 21042
Phone: 410-997-3440 FAX: 410-997-3443 www.hceanea.org

Good Evening Chair Mallo, Vice-Chair Ricks, Members of the Board, Dr. Turner-Little, and Supt. Barnes,

At the last Board meeting, I spoke about the difficulties staff who I encountered in recent site visits, are facing as well as the exasperated challenges they face if they don't have a supportive administrative team. We know that the vast majority of administrators in Howard County are working extremely hard under very difficult circumstances to support their staff, students, and families. School based administrators are a crucial part of building a school culture where staff and students are challenged to meet high standards, where those standards are applied equally to everyone, and where students and staff are given the support and encouragement to meet them. What you'll hear tonight from five different schools are examples where the school-based administrator creates a *different* kind of school culture – one where expectations are inconsistent, where staff are provided few resources, and feel afraid to speak up for what their students need.

Members of this Board said staff could reach out at any time to inform them of what is happening at schools. Superintendent Barnes echoed the same, even reminding everyone about how he feels about the fear of retaliation against staff, that it doesn't have a place in his administration. Tonight, I've brought a few members from some of the schools I've visited to address the daily difficulties they experience. However, what is still the most chilling, is that I'll be reading statements from members at three schools anonymously because they continue to feel targeted by their principals and afraid of retaliation. Please intently listen to what they have to share.

Lake Elkhorn Middle School

The following was sent by a staff member at Lake Elkhorn Middle School

Members of the Board and Superintendent,

On April 30, Superintendent Bill Barnes publicly stated, "The quickest way off my team is to be perpetuating a fear of retaliation."

Right now, Lake Elkhorn Middle School is experiencing critically low morale. The majority of staff members feel that the current leadership has fostered a school climate based on intimidation, fear, and division. Recently, staff are starting to overcome this fear and speak out openly and collectively in order to gain the support they need.

I would like to share one recent scenario so you can understand our climate. After a staff member of color was informed that they would not continue in their role next school year, more than 40 colleagues wrote letters in support of her. Within 48 hours, 45 LEMS staff emailed HCPSS leadership to express both their disagreement with the decision and their appreciation for this individual's contributions to the school community.

The very next day, the principal addressed students during morning announcements, stating that "sometimes people spread negative things and want to bring you down," comparing "negative energy" to "old lady perfume" that "rubs off on others." Students and staff members were confused, concerned, and upset by these comments. To staff, the morning announcements were being used to indirectly address and intimidate staff members for speaking out.

There are too many other retaliatory, discriminatory and bullying comments to name but here are a few...

- "There are a lot of evil spirits in this building that we need to get rid of"
- "This is transfer time and I am the captain of the ship, so if you don't like it here jump off"
- "I sacrifice too much to be the principal here and I will be here next year"
- "I am the principal here, and I will die here"
- Pushes his faith on staff members and students on the morning announcements by saying "God Loves You"
- "There are too many gossipers and cliques here that we need to get rid of"
- Many other comments that consist of misogyny, sexism, bias and abuse of power that are directed disproportionately to educators of color.

As a result, many employees have requested transfers, and the school has already lost dedicated professionals because of what many perceive as a toxic and disjointed leadership environment. Staff members want to remain at LEMS in spite of the poor leadership, and continue serving their community. They also want to come to work without fear of retaliation, intimidation, or division.

Despite these challenges, staff members continue showing up every day for students. They organize field trips, field days, and assemblies, work to raise test scores, and create engaging, meaningful lessons. Imagine what they could accomplish with leadership that is communicative and unifying?

On April 30, Superintendent Bill Barnes also stated, “We have said it — we don’t mean it unless we follow up on it, right?”

We are asking you to follow up on your statement that the quickest way off your team is to perpetuate a fear of retaliation.

Hammond High School: Mary Goff

Good evening. My name is Mary Goff. I’ve been a teacher for 26 years at the same Howard County high school, where I also serve as one of the HCEA representatives. I am here tonight to advocate for schools that have a low morale score on the annual HCEA Job Satisfaction Survey or JSS. The JSS is an annual snapshot into the functioning of a school.

For nearly a decade, our school’s staff morale was strong. From 2014 through 2023, between 80 and 98 percent of staff agreed that morale at our school was good.

But after 2023, everything changed.

In 2023–2024, morale dropped to 47 percent.

In 2024–2025, it fell again to 25 percent — the lowest score for any high school in the county.

And in 2025–2026, it stagnated at 27 percent, still the lowest high school score in the county.

Since the 23-24 results came out, our staff have repeatedly tried to communicate concerns to school leadership. We met multiple times with Executive Director of Secondary Schools.

Here is what the decreased morale means in our school:

- Communication between staff and administration has broken down

- Lack of policy enforcement — especially the cell phone policy, which has made classroom instruction increasingly difficult.
- A growing divide between support staff and educators.

But since those concerns were presented, staff have seen no meaningful effort to address them.

And that is why morale continues to fall.

Today, staff no longer trust that administration will follow through. With larger class sizes and minimal administrative support, teachers are exhausted and feel unprotected.

Veteran teachers, new teachers, and mid-career teachers are now requesting transfers — not because they want to leave our school, but because they feel they have no choice.

We feel like we are drowning. We have been asking for help. And the response from Central Office has largely been: *"We will get back to you."*

We cannot keep waiting. Our students, staff, and school cannot afford more years like this.

I am asking you to take the HCEA JSS results seriously — and to take action now to support and effect change for schools with chronically low morale across the county.

Thank you.

Murray Hill Middle School

The current administrator in my school does not want to support or cultivate a positive working or learning environment for all. I was going to speak in person, but I am afraid of retaliation. Both written and verbal communication at my school is unclear, ambiguous, and many times, dismissive. Established processes have been pushed aside to replace decisions that were already made though joint decisions between assistant principals and staff with no advanced notice. Placements and decisions involving students seem to be predicated on your relationship with the principal. Parents have told teachers that the principal has spoken negatively about them and their program.

I have been called names indirectly, as she uses race and name-calling to malign me and my team members to our families. This seems to be a pattern of behavior HCPSS has tolerated as staff have filed EEOC complaints in the past.

The environment improved when our assistant principals took the reins during the first semester. However, when the Division of Schools came out to inform staff that our principal would be returning, many staff members began to cry. This resulted in central office staff scheduling listen and learn sessions at our school. Although many staff felt heard during these sessions, none of them feel like anything has been done to remedy or even improve the situation.

I am pleading for help to address these administrative issues and improve our working environment for staff and students.

Bryant Woods Elementary School

I am reading this for a teacher at Bryant Woods ES who is someone that has both witnessed and personally experienced what is happening at Bryant Woods this year. Although she believes it is her ethical and professional obligation to speak out, she believes there would be more repercussions for her based on what has already happened under the current leadership.

The HCEA Job Satisfaction for 2025–2026 trend report for Bryant Woods Elementary — covering twelve years of data and identifying the building principal for each year — has just been released. It confirms, in numbers, what educators in this building have been living.

In 2024–2025, Bryant Woods reported some of the highest satisfaction scores in the school's entire documented history under then-Principal Danielle Shanks-Forney. In 2025–2026, Dr. Khaleel Desaque's first year as principal, those numbers collapsed. Fifty out of sixty-two eligible staff responded, making this data statistically credible, and demanding of a response.

The headline figures are unambiguous:

- Overall morale fell from **94.9% to 42.0%** — a drop of nearly 53 percentage points in a single year.
- Trust and open communication fell from **100% to 44.0%**.
- The belief that staff can speak openly without fear of repercussions fell from **94.9% to 56.0%**.
- Reports of harassing behavior from administrators rose from **0% to 19.1%**
- Confidence in the working environment fell from **89.7% to 58.0%**.

I will tell you what those percentages mean in the lived experience of the educators who work at Bryant Woods Elementary School every day.

Since Dr. Desaque's arrival, he has cultivated a building climate in which staff members are afraid to speak, ask questions, or raise concerns. This is not the description of one person. It is the shared experience of multiple staff members. Educators who have voiced professional concerns or whose views have differed from Dr. Desaque's have faced dismissiveness, exclusion, and, in documented instances, what staff have experienced as retaliatory responses.

When plans, ideas, or outcomes conflict with Dr. Desaque's personal preferences, the consistent response has been dismissal rather than dialogue. Staff members who bring professional knowledge, data-informed recommendations, or community-centered concerns to the table have found those contributions ignored or overridden — not because they lacked merit, but because they represented a view that differed from the principal's own. This pattern has eroded the collaborative culture that Bryant Woods spent years building and that the 2024–25 survey — with its 100% agreement on teamwork and communication — reflected.

Additionally, staff have experienced a pattern in which Dr. Desaque offloads substantive administrative responsibilities onto front office staff, instructional staff, and support personnel — responsibilities that appropriately belong to building administration. This increases educator workload beyond what is reasonable or negotiated, contributes to the decline in morale the survey has captured, and signals a failure of professional accountability at the building leadership level.

I am asking this Board to direct administration take three concrete actions:

- **Examine the 2025-26 HCEA Job Satisfaction Survey data for Bryant Woods in its full historical context.** A 53-point collapse in overall morale, a rise in administrator harassment reports from 0% to 19.1%, and the complete erosion of trust and communication — all in one year, under one principal — constitutes a building-level crisis. It is not a bump in transition. It is a pattern.
- **Take seriously the firsthand accounts of Bryant Woods educators.** Multiple staff members, including myself, have experienced a climate of fear, retaliation, and professional dismissal. The HCEA appointment process exists to protect professional working conditions. I am asking you to use it with the urgency the data and these accounts require.
- **Act before experienced educators make the decision to leave.** The research is clear: leadership-driven morale collapse precedes attrition by one to two years. The educators who built Bryant Woods's exceptional record did not lose their commitment overnight.

They are telling you, through this survey, that they are being pushed out. The children at Bryant Woods — many of whom are English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing poverty — cannot afford to lose them.

Bryant Woods Elementary School's students deserve a building where the adults around them are stable, trusted, and professionally supported. The 2025–26 HCEA Job Satisfaction Survey tells us that is no longer the case. This Board has the authority and the responsibility to act. I am asking you to support a school that is quickly declining due to administration's lack of commitment to work in the best interest of students, including the many factors that contribute to students success, including a comfortable, professional, and trusting worthy environment of learning.

Thank you.

HCPSS uses the evaluation system to ensure a quality educator in every classroom because who is in the classroom has a direct impact on student's social, emotional and cognitive needs. This is true for administrators as well. HCASA has presented here before about how principals set the instructional tone, culture, and environment of their schools. They are right. That's why administrators must be held accountable if they create a negative culture.

Again, HCEA is here to ensure and protect fair processes. I hope we can work together to do that, ensure staff voices are not dismissed, and provide a supportive learning environment for staff and students. As James Baldwin stated, "nothing can be changed until it is faced." Please face these challenges, and make the changes that are desperately needed. We hope that in the near future, we can bring staff from these schools here to thank the Board for improving their working conditions. And I want any educator that identifies with this testimony to swallow their fears and muster the courage to speak their truth to this Board and system leadership via email, when they visit your worksites, or contact me directly, and you will be heard.

Bryant Woods Elementary School

OPENING STATEMENT

What I am presenting is grounded in published, publicly available HCEA survey data, verified public record, and peer-reviewed national research — as well as my own firsthand professional experience. I believe it is my ethical and professional obligation to speak, though there may be repercussions based on the current leadership that has been installed at Bryant Woods. That, in itself, speaks to the culture that has taken hold at BWES this school year.

I. THE DATA: A 52-POINT COLLAPSE IN ONE YEAR

Every year, HCEA administers the Job Satisfaction Survey to certificated staff across Howard County. The results are public record. The 2025–2026 trend report for Bryant Woods Elementary — covering twelve years of data and identifying the building principal for each year — has just been released. It confirms, in numbers, what educators in this building have been living.

In 2024–2025, Bryant Woods reported some of the highest satisfaction scores in the school's entire documented history under then-Principal Danielle Shanks-Forney. In 2025–2026, Dr. Khaleel Desaque's first year as principal, those numbers collapsed. The following table draws directly from the HCEA 2025–2026 Job Satisfaction Survey Trend Report for Bryant Woods ES.

Survey Question	2024-25 (Shanks-Forney)	2025-26 (Desaque)
Overall, morale at my worksite is good	94.9%	42.0%
Atmosphere of open communication and trust	100.0%	44.0%
Can speak openly without fear of repercussions	94.9%	56.0%
Treated as a professional	100.0%	84.0%
Good teamwork among staff	100.0%	88.0%
Involved in decision-making	94.9%	69.4%
Administrators respect negotiated contracts	100.0%	83.0%
Working environment conducive to success	89.7%	58.0%
Work performance evaluated fairly	92.3%	83.3%
Harassing behavior from administrators/supervisors	0.0%	19.1%

Source: HCEA 2025-2026 Job Satisfaction Survey Trend Report, Bryant Woods ES (50 of 62 eligible staff responded). Principal listed as Khaleel Desaque.

The headline figures are unambiguous:

- Overall morale fell from **94.9% to 42.0%** — a drop of nearly 53 percentage points in a single year.
- Trust and open communication fell from **100% to 44.0%**.
- The belief that staff can speak openly without fear of repercussions fell from **94.9% to 56.0%**.
- Reports of harassing behavior from administrators rose from **0% to 19.1%** — nearly 1 in 5 Bryant Woods staff reported experiencing harassing behavior from administration this year.
- Confidence in the working environment fell from **89.7% to 58.0%**.

This is not a dip or a fluctuation. This is a collapse — documented, measured, and published — that occurred in the first year of a single principal's tenure. Fifty out of sixty-two eligible staff responded, making this one of the highest participation rates in the school's history. The signal is clear, statistically credible, and demands a response.

II. FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE: A CULTURE OF FEAR, RETALIATION, AND UNACCOUNTABILITY

The data tells a story in percentages. I am here to tell you what those percentages mean in the lived experience of the educators who work at Bryant Woods Elementary School every day.

A Culture of Fear and Retaliation

Since Dr. Desaque's arrival, he has cultivated a building climate in which staff members are afraid to speak, ask questions, or raise concerns. This is not the description of one person. It is the shared experience of multiple staff members, including myself. Educators who have voiced professional concerns or whose views have differed from Dr. Desaque's have faced dismissiveness, exclusion, and, in documented instances, what staff have experienced as retaliatory responses.

The HCEA survey data reflects this reality with precision. The 39-point drop in the belief that staff can speak openly without fear of repercussions — from 94.9% to 56.0% — is not an abstraction. It represents real people who have chosen silence because they have learned that speaking carries consequences. And the 19.1% of staff who reported experiencing harassing behavior from administrators — up from zero — represents colleagues who have been made to feel unsafe in their own professional home.

Disregard for the Perspectives and Contributions of Others

Effective school leadership requires the ability to integrate the ideas, expertise, and perspectives of the people in the building — particularly when those perspectives challenge or complicate the leader's own preferences. What Bryant Woods staff have experienced under Dr. Desaque is the opposite of that.

When plans, ideas, or outcomes conflict with Dr. Desaque's personal preferences, the consistent response has been dismissal rather than dialogue. Staff members who bring professional knowledge, data-informed recommendations, or community-centered concerns to the table have found those contributions ignored or overridden — not because they lacked merit, but because they represented a view that differed from the principal's own. This pattern has eroded the collaborative culture that Bryant Woods spent years building and that the 2024–25 survey — with its 100% agreement on teamwork and communication — reflected.

Additionally, staff have experienced a pattern in which Dr. Desaque offloads substantive administrative responsibilities onto front office staff, instructional staff, and support personnel — responsibilities that appropriately belong to building administration. This increases educator workload beyond what is reasonable or negotiated, contributes to the decline in morale the survey has captured, and signals a failure of professional accountability at the building leadership level.

III. THE CONTRADICTION AT THE HEART OF THIS APPOINTMENT: RESEARCH VS. PRACTICE

Dr. Desaque holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Shippensburg University. His dissertation, defended in October 2018, is titled:

"An Analysis of the Impact of the Community Schools Strategy on the Reading and Mathematics Student Achievement of Elementary School Students in a High Poverty School District."

In his own words, as published by Shippensburg University, Dr. Desaque described the Community Schools Strategy as "a passion of mine" — research focused on how wraparound services, community trust, and relationship-building improve academic achievement in high-poverty schools. Upon arriving at Bryant Woods, he publicly expressed enthusiasm for the school's transition to a Community School model, stating he aimed to "collaborate with internal and external stakeholders, including staff, parents, and community members."

Source: HCPSS News, Meet Our New 2025-2026 Principals, October 2025; Shippensburg University Magazine, Fall 2018.

I want to engage with that claim seriously, because the Community Schools model is a serious and evidence-based framework. The research on Community Schools — including Dr. Desaque's own dissertation — centers on a foundational premise: that

academic achievement in high-poverty communities cannot be separated from the strength of trust and relationships among students, staff, families, and community partners. The model does not work without those relationships. It cannot.

What Bryant Woods staff, students, and families have experienced this year is not the implementation of that model. It is its antithesis. The Community Schools framework requires:

- **Relational trust between building leadership and staff.** The 2025–26 HCEA data shows trust has fallen from 100% to 44%.
- **Psychological safety for educators to bring their full expertise to the work.** The survey shows nearly half of staff no longer feel they can speak openly without fear.
- **Meaningful engagement with families and community stakeholders.** Staff report that the relationship-building infrastructure necessary for this work has not been established.
- **Shared leadership and collaborative decision-making.** Staff involvement in decision-making fell from 94.9% to 69.4%.

There is a profound disconnect between Dr. Desaque's scholarly expertise and the leadership behaviors he has demonstrated at Bryant Woods. He has written a dissertation on the importance of trust-building in high-poverty school communities. He is now leading a high-poverty, multilingual school community in which trust has collapsed on every measurable dimension in a single year.

This Board should not need to wait for a second year of data to conclude that the Community Schools model — the framework Dr. Desaque built his doctoral career around — is not being implemented in good faith at Bryant Woods Elementary School.

IV. WHAT THE NATIONAL RESEARCH TELLS US

The pattern documented at Bryant Woods this year is precisely what a robust body of national research predicts when building leadership fails to meet standards of professional trust, communication, and equity-centered practice.

Principal Leadership Is the Primary Driver of Teacher Retention and School Climate

A landmark synthesis of 219 studies by the Wallace Foundation (2021) confirmed that effective principals have a direct, measurable effect on teacher retention, school culture, and student outcomes — while ineffective or harmful leadership accelerates the departure of the most experienced and committed educators.

Wallace Foundation (2021). How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research.

Ladd (2011), Kraft, Marinell, and Yee (2016), and Boyd et al. (2011) independently identified principal leadership as the single most significant school-level predictor of teacher turnover. When teachers report low trust, exclusion from decision-making, and fear of repercussions — precisely the conditions the 2025–26 Bryant Woods data reflects — departure of the most qualified educators follows within one to two years.

Kraft, M., Marinell, W., & Yee, D. (2016). School Organizational Contexts, Teacher Turnover, and Student Achievement. American Educational Research Journal.

Research on the specific role of fear-based and retaliatory leadership climates further confirms: when educators cannot speak openly about professional concerns, the costs are borne disproportionately by students — particularly students in high-need, high-poverty communities who depend most on the stability and commitment of experienced staff.

Learning Policy Institute (2022). The Role of Principals in Addressing Teacher Shortages.

The Community Schools Research — Dr. Desaque's Own Field

The research base on Community Schools is unequivocal: the model lives or dies on the quality of relationships and trust within the school community. Coalition for Community Schools research and the Children's Aid Society model both identify principal leadership as the single most critical variable in successful Community Schools implementation. Principals who cannot build relational trust with their own staff cannot build the wraparound community partnerships the model requires.

Coalition for Community Schools (2017). Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence.

This is Dr. Desaque's own area of doctoral expertise. The evidence he cited in his dissertation — that trust and relationship-building are prerequisites for improving outcomes in high-poverty schools — applies directly and urgently to Bryant Woods today.

V. MY REQUEST TO THIS BOARD

I am asking this Board to take three concrete actions:

- **Examine the 2025-26 HCEA Job Satisfaction Survey data for Bryant Woods in its full historical context.** A 53-point collapse in overall morale, a rise in administrator harassment reports from 0% to 19.1%, and the complete erosion of trust and communication — all in one year, under one principal — constitutes a building-level crisis. It is not a bump in transition. It is a pattern.
- **Take seriously the firsthand accounts of Bryant Woods educators.** Multiple staff members, including myself, have experienced a climate of fear, retaliation, and professional dismissal. The HCEA appointment process exists to protect professional working conditions. I am asking you to use it with the urgency the data and these accounts require.
- **Act before experienced educators make the decision to leave.** The research is clear: leadership-driven morale collapse precedes attrition by one to two years. The educators who built Bryant Woods's exceptional record did not lose their commitment overnight. They are telling you, through this survey, that they are being pushed out. The children at Bryant Woods — many of whom are English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing poverty — cannot afford to lose them.

Bryant Woods Elementary School's students deserve a building where the adults around them are stable, trusted, and professionally supported. The 2025–26 HCEA Job Satisfaction Survey tells us that is no longer the case. This Board has the authority and the responsibility to act. I am asking you to lean on the Howard County slogan of choosing civility, as well as supporting a school that is quickly declining due to administration's lack of commitment to work in the best interest of students, including the many factors that contribute to students success, including a comfortable, professional, and trusting worthy environment of learning.