

# School Board Gets Earful on Student Behavior Teachers Say Violence is Widespread

By Dick Myers  
Editor

Several weeks ago, the Calvert County Board of Education heard from four people concerned about student behavior that has led to violence against teachers and other students. The speakers were local representatives of the teachers and support staff, the head of Maryland Education Association, which represents the state's teachers and the husband of a teacher whose jaw was broken by one of her students. The County Times story about the public forum at which the concerns were raised led with the headline "Classroom Crisis?"

The speakers at the school board's Oct. 24 evening public forum answered the headline's question with an emphatic "Yes!" And in case anyone thought that just four speakers didn't raise the level of concern, this latest public forum went on for a marathon more than two-and-a-half hours and featured more than 40 speakers, most of whom were teachers.

The public forum came immediately after a staff presentation to the board on the school system's Behavior Development Program (BDP). School officials have blamed the perceived escalating problem on special needs students in that program.

But several forum speakers said that was not the case. The first speaker, Michelle Parrott, a school health nurse at Barstow Elementary, said, "Our schools are supposed to be a safe place for not only our students to learn, but also for your employees to work. It is no secret that Barstow houses one of our county's BDP programs that is currently in crisis. Each of the children enrolled in this program have legitimate mental health and/or behavioral health diagnoses. While the majority of the assaults that I'm about to speak with you about tonight are perpetrated by these various students, please make no mistake, the violence we are seeing in our schools is much more widespread and not just isolated to the students in this program."

Assistant Superintendent for Instruction Dianne Workman explained to the board that BDP "is designed to support the students with extreme challenging behavior or social emotional learning deficits that negatively impact their academic performance. And all of these students have at one point been educated in their home schools and have interventions that have been tried within the homeschools and for various reasons have been found to be ineffective."

Supervisor of Special Education Dr. Jason Miller said that BDP is in Barstow and Mutual elementary schools, Plum Point and Southern middle schools and Huntingtown High School. Workman said the sites were chosen based on available space and proximity to students needing the program.

Miller said, "There are six total BDP teachers in the county. Currently we have a vacancy and that one is being temporarily filled by a teacher that we have moved to support those students."

Several forum speakers questioned the credentials of some of those teachers and their training to handle the situations that such students can bring about in and outside the classroom. Miller said three of the BDP teachers are experienced.

Director of Special Education Christine Harris said, "I do think it's really difficult with high turnover of special education teachers. We have a national shortage." She said it's especially difficult to recruit to Calvert because of its lack of social activities and shortage of affordable housing.



Miller noted, "I have noticed in the past four years, the needs of the students that we are seeing now are increasing with each year. So, as students come in their needs and the support we need to provide them are increasing every year. Right now, I don't have the answer to what's causing that, but I'm recognizing it as a pattern so far."

Harris, on questioning from board member Inez Claggett, agreed that more staffing and more staff training were needed. Which prompted Claggett to say to School Superintendent Dr. Daniel Curry, "Could you direct your staff to provide to you what they think we need to provide as far as staffing? Even if it's something that is unrealistic, if they could give us a true picture of what they feel that we need here in Calvert County to be able to support our teachers in the proper way, provide the staffing that is needed for the children that are attending schools here in CCPs."

Claggett was the main mover of the recent policy change on restraint and seclusion to require imminent danger to the student or others before those methods are used. That has brought criticism from teachers who say it makes it more difficult to control situations before they get out of hand. But Harris said, "Restraint and seclusion was never designed to control behavior, it was designed to protect students and staff from danger to self or others."

Speaker after speaker during the forum told of persistent behavior problems this year. Parrott said, "I am here tonight to ask that the board take notice and to work to create an expedited plan to react to students with documented incidences of violence against staff and students every single day since the beginning of this school year."

She said what many of the speakers after her said, "I'd like to tell you about the innocent children that get caught in the crossfire. These students have had items including desks and chairs thrown at them. They have been stabbed, bitten, punched, kicked and spat on. As a parent myself, I would be livid to learn that my child was injured by a student who was known to be violent and precautions were not put in place to protect my child. Lastly, let me talk about your staff. They are broken. It is the new norm for me to complete numerous incident reports, daily documenting injuries to staff members."

Kristin Morris, a second-grade teacher, said, "Today there are at least 10 such students on our campus at Windy Hill that are sucking the life out of our teaching environments. The board must take a stronger leadership role, engage your teachers on the front lines to learn firsthand what our challenges are."

A number of speakers criticized the program being instituted in the school system called "Learning Focused." Calvert Education Association board member Gary Clites said 63 percent of teachers do not support its usage.

Karen Hutchins, a classroom teacher at Plum Point Elementary School, said the problems there are in the general classrooms with "chairs being thrown, objects being thrown in classrooms and offices being torn apart." She added, "The trauma that we as a staff are witnessing and the trauma that our students are going through as they watch these episodes is overwhelming to many of us."

Hutchins said, "We are not asking to place students directly into behavior development programs. We are asking for the process to be faster when we have a student who is disrupting class on a daily basis, multiple times a day and we have seen the outbursts week after week."

Some of the teachers told off their own physical abuse. Lee Cox, a physical education teacher for 27 years, told of being assaulted eight years ago by a Plum Point third grader. "I live in physical pain every day from the repeated beating my body took."

Heidi Tracy, a school psychologist, advocated for more. She said, "Three years ago, a group of us met with Dr. Curry and individually with three of the board members. We advocated for increased staffing to support mental health and behavior concerns and lower school psych ratios to be proactive for our students' needs." She said the request fell on deaf ears.

Lauren Edinger, a special education teacher at Windy Hill Elementary School, said, "Things are beyond out of control and something needs to be done immediately to improve what was once a great school system. My husband and I moved to Calvert County 19 years ago in order to give our three children a great public education. I thank God that my children are grown and out of the school system before it became what it is today -- a very sad, failing, disappointing school system."

Sandy Weems Jones, a 27-year system veteran, said, "There has not been one day this year that our class has not had a behavior issue disrupting our class."

At the end of the speakers, Board of Education President Dawn Balinski said, "It's amazing and we have to have a lot of discussion and we will take this to heart." She added, "Thank you for what you do and I'm hoping so much we can work together. We'll solve this. We will start to solve this."