



March 5, 2020

Chair Anne Kaiser
Ways and Means Committee

Testimony in **SUPPORT** of HB1255

Dear Chair Kaiser and Committee Members,

CASA, the largest immigrant rights organization in Maryland, submit this letter outlining our **SUPPORT for HB 1255** --- Bilingual Learner Prekindergarten Grant Program--- purposing to a establish a Bilingual Learner Prekindergarten Grant program to provide County Boards of Education with grants to assist in creating pilot programs to expand bilingual education or facilitate family engagement initiatives with parents whose primary language is not English.

In 2014, CASA along with Prince George's County Public Schools, and through funding with the US Department of Education, began a family engagement program called Learning Together, a multi-generational family engagement program to prepare parents living in Langley Park, Maryland become the first advocates for their children, improve how they navigate school systems and improve the way they support their children to improve their educational outcomes. In the three years, we implemented this program we had 100 parents graduate from our parent training program and had an additional 500 parents who participated in stand-alone workshops, education conferences and community wide events. One of the concerns repeatedly shared by these parents was how their children, mostly first generation, immigrant students, were began to lose their home language as soon as they entered school. The schools they entered did not have Bilingual programs and had limited access to services or resources that could support the continuation of their home languages. While bilingual schools had expanded to serve other populations in Prince George's County, access to bilingual education was limited to those who already were bilingual.

Data now shows that in Maryland, every single district has a student who identifies as English Language Learner, which could mean one of two things: they come from a home in which their primary language is not English despite being born in this country or they have arrived from a country that is not English dominant. Yet a small amount of these students have access to bilingual education. A majority that do have access are students whose families are English dominant and now consider bilingualism to be a step towards a more socio-economically future. Maryland needs more bilingual education programs that are accessible to a broad group of students and parents of these students need to be given better access to their children's educations to become involved and supportive of their children. I have worked with families who despite having limited education understand that the best pathway out of poverty is by ensuring their kids have access to a better education. They also struggle with wanting to have better education and holding on to the cultural richness that they bring from their home countries and want to have continued in their children's lives.

HB1255 would expand the growing trend of bilingual education, would improve family engagement with parents who want to be involved and provide much needed training to providers and school staff who also want to see students and families thrive. We know that such a program would expand these opportunities in a state in which nearly 30% of students come from homes in which English is not the primary language. Therefore we urge a favorable report to HB1255.

Thank you,

Maritza Solano
Director of Education
CASA

