

Written Testimony from Maryland School for the Deaf Faculty and Staff Association

AFT Local 4828

Submitted by Deborah Hill, Vice President, for Columbia Campus

HB – 837 Collective Bargaining – Staff – Maryland School for the Deaf

Before the House Appropriations Committee

February 10, 2021

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Good afternoon madam Chair and members of the House Appropriations Committee. My name is Deborah Hill. I am a 30+ year employee at Columbia Campus. I have assumed various roles over the year and now my 5th year as an Elementary Department “secretary” but classified as a clerical aide. I used to be a teacher’s aide for over 15 years and also an RCYCP which was called Dorm Counselor back then. I am currently the Vice President for AFT Local 4828, the union for educational staff working at the Maryland School for Deaf. On behalf of the hundreds of public school educators working to teach Maryland’s students enrolled at our state’s School for the Deaf, I call for a favorable-with-amendments report on HB 837, the bill that would grant us the right to engage in collective bargaining, a right that every other public school teacher in the state has.

Through years of experience, it pains me to see our employees not getting step increases when they are overly due for it. The dedicated/committed staff invests so much time to prepare materials and lessons to comply with the adopted curriculum of Frederick County and to make sure they fit for each student in the class. Students’ levels vary and it is challenging for many of our teachers/staff to adapt their work to meet the needs of students. When I mentioned materials, we often pay from our pockets because the supplies are limited at the school. Many of our students come to the school with limited language. MSD is the place where they acquire the language because our staff are qualified ASL users and we provide that language accessibility. ASL is a language which staff must have if they work at MSD. Newly hired staff receive more pay than some of our veteran teachers. That does not justify it accurately. The faculty employees are given a paying job which should be commensurate with years of employment and experience. We cannot afford to lose our people. They deserve professional respect. Without us, the Deaf/Hard of hearing students would go back to the county and they would be lost. Our students NEED us! I am nearing retirement and for so long, I have and still work two jobs. I would love to travel and enjoy my years ahead of me. But, I will be honest with you - I am afraid because I have not had a step increase in so long.

My daughter graduated in 2019 from college with a BA majoring in Social Work and is currently a contractual employee as a teacher’s aide at Columbia Campus. She does not have a pension. She is now considering a second job just to help defray the cost of healthcare and to be able to save. My daughter has a large student loan debt to worry about. I truly hope she will have a much better experience than mine. With this bill, I hope to correct that mistake.

Members of the committee, it is an unfortunate truth that our educational staff are part of the very few public school educators that do not enjoy collective bargaining rights. Because of this, the Maryland School for the Deaf has been harmed. While I am proud of the work my colleagues and I do to educate the state’s Deaf/hard-of-hearing children, we have lost a number of highly qualified educators to the

counties where the benefits and job protections are more solidified. Just by way of a recent example, with the impending passage of Kirwan, which we enthusiastically support, educational staff at the school are unsure if the improvements proposed by that commission will be afforded to us, as many of the improvements proposed must be by law bargained collectively. Passage of this bill will go a long way towards seeing that our school—which provides vital educational services to Maryland's deaf and hard-of-hearing students—will no longer be treated differently than any other public school in the state.

The amendments we are proposing would clarify who is eligible for collective bargaining at the school, making the process available to teachers, specialists, and other non-supervisory staff at the school. Employees who do these jobs at schools in local county school districts have unionization rights, and the amendment we are proposing would bring the Maryland School for the Deaf in line with those school systems.

Again, I urge a favorable report for HB 837. Thank you so much.