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## **SB680- State and Local Parks - Playground Accessibility - Communication Boards**

**March 1, 2022 at 1 pm.**

**Senate Education Health and Environmental Affairs Committee**

### **Position: Support with Amendment**

The Arc Maryland is the largest statewide advocacy organization dedicated to the rights and quality of life of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and we enthusiastically support SB680 with suggestions for what we perceive would be helpful amendments.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Boards (AAC Boards) can be great tools to help children with nontraditional ways of communicating to interact with their friends. These boards are also fun and informative for typical communicators to use in play with each other. **We believe the existence of these boards as natural, expected components of a playground, will help to break down stigmas and normalize interactions between traditional and non-traditional communicators.** This will shape how children without disabilities perceive children who use AAC devices in the community and school, and will shape how students with disabilities who use AAC devices see themselves.

**Playground communication boards have been placed in a few areas of Maryland with great effect.** In Howard County for example, the county has installed large communication boards at Waverly, Cedar Lane, Bellows Spring, Clarksville, Dayton Oaks, Ilchester, Pointers Run and Rockburn Elementary Schools, and recently added a board to their community playground at Blandair Regional Park. According to the Howard County Autism Society, who helped fund and provide the boards, the community loves them and they get a lot of use.<sup>i</sup>

To use the communication boards, children point to pictures on the display to express their thoughts and feelings. The symbols on the board are typically selected from a licensed AAC symbol library, with selection assistance from speech-language pathologists specifically for use on playgrounds. The boards may also include braille, and are designed to encourage a sense of community as well as an inclusive, more equitable play environment.

Communication symbols should be logically categorized by their parts of speech for communication ease. Consistent arrangement of symbols from board to board and playground to playground helps to promote use and inspire confidence while building skills to engage in conversation and enhance literacy.<sup>ii</sup>

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Just as our computer keyboards have consistent placement of all letters with numbers and function keys located predictably, and some keyboards contain additional options on the right or left of the letter board for flexibility, we recommend that the communication boards that are installed as a result of this legislation contain consistent (and consistently located) “Core” words and symbols in addition to optional “Fringe” (flexible) words.

**Core Words** are consistent words or word symbols used in a fixed location on a board to provide consistency from board to board for communication efficiency.

**Fringe Words** are words or word symbols that may vary from board to board, in a fixed location on a board, for activity-specific, location specific, or other flexible communication options.

Please refer to the diagram as an example of a board that contains Core and Fringe Words:



(Source: <https://www.closingthegap.com/talk-to-me-technologies-communication-boards-for-parks-playgrounds-schools-and-more/>)

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We appreciate the opportunity to provide the following amendment suggestions for the Sponsor's consideration:

To Definitions:

5-2001.

**Change:** (B) "COMMUNICATION BOARD" MEANS A DEVICE THAT DISPLAYS PICTURE COMMUNICATION SYMBOLS WITH WORDS AND BRAILLE THAT IS USED TO SUPPLEMENT OR REPLACE SPOKEN LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION.

Add definitions:

#### **Core Words**

Core words are consistent words or word symbols used in a fixed location on a board to provide consistency from board to board for communication efficiency.

#### **Fringe Words**

Fringe words are words or word symbols that may vary from board to board, in a fixed location on a board, for activity-specific, location specific, or other flexible communication options.

5-2002

**Change:** ON OR BEFORE OCTOBER 1, 2027, THE DEPARTMENT AND EACH LOCAL GOVERNING BODY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLAYGROUNDS SHALL CONSTRUCT A COMMUNICATION BOARD IN EACH PLAYGROUND UNDER ITS JURISDICTION THAT:

- (A) Contains core communication symbols with words and braille that are reasonably consistent from board to board in each jurisdiction, in both content and layout.
- (B) May contain additional fringe vocabulary at the discretion of each jurisdiction.

In closing, we truly appreciate the Sponsor's leadership to create more inclusive, inviting, and welcoming places to play for all children and we ask for a favorable report on SB680 with amendments.

For more information, please contact:

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<sup>i</sup> <https://howard-autism.org/resources/hcas-resources/communication-boards-building-inclusive-playgrounds/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://aacccommunity.net/citation/consistent-symbol-location-affects-motor-learning-in-preschoolers-without-disabilities-implications-for-designing-augmentative-and-alternative-communication-displays/>