

As a homeschooling family in Montgomery County, a small business owner and a long standing Maryland resident, I am against the passing of HB832. We need to apply the brakes to allow an indepth, unhurried conversation – on the same channels currently used to discuss HB832 plus many, many more. There is no reason to rush and force such a novel, untested idea into statute, especially when no other state has one except NH. Because once it is passed, it would be extremely difficult to remove from MD statutory language.

Concerns with HB832: Diminishes Power/Voice of Grassroots Homeschoolers; Has Intentions Not Enforced by the Language in the Bill

1--HB832 makes it far too easy for MD State Department of Education (MSDE) to choose to ignore the voices of all HSers except those on the council. The council will be seen as the ‘legal voice’, the primary voice, perhaps the only voice of HSers, making it harder for grassroots HSers to advocate with any effectiveness and be heard by MSDE, especially when they disagree with the council. The council becomes another layer of bureaucracy that grassroots HSers must work through to advocate for their positions, instead of just going directly to MSDE.

2—The council has NO accountability to the homeschool community whatsoever. It is an entity answerable only to itself. It is NOT a representative council, but an appointed one, starting with four appointed by Del Ruth and two state and two county government employees who have voting rights. These initial members then choose all remaining HS council members, and the council chooses its successors, making it a self-perpetuating body – which can easily devolve into a clique or an ideologically narrow group despite outward diversity.

3—The council is NOT required to be transparent or accessible to the HS community beyond the open meeting laws of the State (attend/watch meetings, access meeting documents on State website, ask questions during comment time at meeting). The bill makes no requirement that the council make itself or its work further transparent/accessible to the HS community for input, discussion, information sharing, explanations of actions, etc.

4—HSers have no veto power over council actions or decisions. The bill gives HSers no method of removing council members whose actions jeopardize HS freedoms.

5—And, HB832 does NOT include any language that forces MSDE to engage with council members in good faith with full transparency, as some maintain. It does NOT force MSDE to “share accurate and timely information with the council” as some say, or include us in their decision-making.

Amendments Will Not Make It Beneficial:

Because the core idea of a HS Advisory Council imposed by state law is fundamentally flawed, no amendments of any kind will make it beneficial to our HS liberties in MD. The council would weaken our grassroots power at best and potentially could lead to poor or seriously damaging decisions for us at the worst, with no grassroots recourse.

Another Solution:

Every benefit the bill seeks to offer can be accomplished **without** a new state HS law that prescribes how we advocate with MSDE and gives the state voting power in the decisions. We must increase and expand our grassroots advocacy as the solution for anyone who has said they'd like to have a voice in HS matters in Maryland. It can result in an unlimited number of diverse people able to advocate for HSing now and continuing into future generations.

--Increasing MSDE Access: If HB832 isn't amended to require MSDE to hold regular, open meetings with the homeschool community instead of creating a state homeschool council, then homeschoolers need to host OPEN meetings with MSDE themselves. In the past, MSDE and the county HS liaisons enthusiastically participated in meetings with umbrellas held by MACHE (once a 4,000-member group until it closed this past year when its leaders retired). It was HSers who dropped the ball in continuing these meetings. We must resume them in a different format, increase their frequency, and expand them to include HS families, not just umbrellas. I have no doubt that the unexpected roar of HS voices heard by the General Assembly and MSDE about this bill, with the support of our legislative allies, will cause MSDE to agree to resume these meetings with the HS community.

--Advocacy Toolkits: We must create HS Advocacy Toolkits freely available to the HS community so everyone can learn how to personally advocate on the state and county levels. These would be nonpartisan, online information tools that everyone can support and use. Those of us who have been dealing with MSDE for decades can describe how the agencies work and how to advocate directly. It also would include Information Pages of people to contact within MSDE, MHEC, Nonpublic School Approval Branch, MBOE; info on using the MD Register; running history of changes to the HS COMAR, list of MD Facebook groups and other communication channels; etc. I'm prepared to coordinate this effort and ensure it is available as a free resource to everyone.

This is the grassroots eternal vigilance advocacy that we know we can rely on. I'd rather trust it than entrust our future HS freedoms to an untried State-enacted council with government voting members that we cannot elect, cannot remove, doesn't answer to anyone, and has no accountability to the HS community that it is supposed to speak for.