

Homeschoolers Reject HB 832

Testimony from Rachel Scher (Montgomery County)

HB 832 is a solution in search of a problem. Its author, Delegate Sheila Ruth, wants you to believe that as a former homeschooler, her view and her bill consider the needs of current homeschoolers. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For 15 years, I have been homeschooling my children in Montgomery County. My eldest graduated last year and I continue to homeschool an eight-year-old and two teenagers. As a long hauler, I participate in homeschool activities and groups, in person and via social media, local and statewide. Not a single person in any of those forums has ever advocated for more government involvement. No one ever discussed an interest in creating a politically appointed board to replace our own voices in the political process.

In fact, I am sure that many homeschoolers first learned of HB 832 as I did from one of its advocates calling for support on a Facebook page. So many people objected to it that the moderator shut down comments and with it, further dissent.

I would like to make it clear that current homeschoolers have begged Delegate Ruth to withdraw HB 832. Her response has been patronizing re-explanations of the bill's content. Delegate Ruth and members of the Ways and Means Committee, let me be clear: Homeschoolers reject this bill. We don't want political appointees to represent us because there is an inherent conflict of interest.

The status quo allows all homeschoolers – regardless of religion, race or educational philosophy – to advocate on our own behalf and to form our own coalitions for the purpose of communicating with regulators and elected officials in Annapolis. In fact, that's what we're doing now to speak out against this unnecessary legislation. If there were a politically appointed advisory board that purported to represent the diversity of Maryland homeschoolers – such as the one that would be created by HB 832 – I have no doubt that those voices would be amplified above all others. This is problematic for three reasons:

- First of all, half the advisory board positions are reserved for people who are not necessarily homeschooling. They would include political appointees and directors of umbrella groups who may have homeschooled at one time, but who may not be doing it any longer. Even if the remainder of the positions are filled from across the state, how could only a handful of people truly represent the diversity of the homeschooling community in Maryland, particularly since our numbers have doubled in the last two years as a result of the pandemic?
- In addition, there is real concern that Maryland could make changes to the COMAR in an attempt to reverse the pandemic related exodus from the public schools. HB 832 provides no guardrails to prevent a politically appointed board from going along with or, worse, encouraging such a development.

- Finally, the proposed makeup of the advisory board would create an inherent conflict of interest. It would include regulators as well as individuals who might profit from additional regulation, namely umbrella organizations and educational consultants.

Umbrella organizations sell a service to the homeschool community. At a minimum, they charge a fee to conduct annual reviews. Some umbrellas also sell other services. Any change to current regulations that attract homeschoolers to seek their oversight is beneficial to their business model. The same would be true for any type of paid educational consultant who might be appointed to serve on the advisory board proposed by HB 832.

This bill proposes that the fox guard the henhouse. I appeal to the members of the Ways & Means Committee to acknowledge the conflict of interest inherent in this legislation and to please reject HB 832.