

TESTIMONY AGAINST

Testimony to the Ways and Means Committee
In opposition to
House Bill 618: Maryland Parental Rights Act
February 24, 2022

Strong Schools Maryland urges an unfavorable vote on House Bill 618: Maryland Parental Rights Act.

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future envisions a world-class system of public schools for our state's students. Central to its implementation are priorities around community engagement for the Accountability and Implementation Board and the state's largest expansion of Community Schools, an intergenerational approach to meeting student needs in a school setting by leveraging community assets.

Maryland has been and continues to work to ensure students, families, and school community members have a fair say about the direction our schools are trending in. Calls for "parental rights" like the ones in this bill are not any true measure of parental right, but rather about expanding even further the power small sects of Maryland parents (wealthy, well-connected, those whose time is unburdened by family-sustaining work and the complications of racism, poverty, xenophobia, and ableism) are able to exert over a system of public education that has been underfunded and hampered for generations.

House Bill 618 describes itself as advancing the rights of parents, but instead contains the following provisions, ranging from unnecessary to harmful:

- Mandates the segregation of public comment from parents/guardians of public school students from other public comments at State Board of Education and county board of education meetings
 - Does this without a clear methodology to distinguish between parents of students and random adults *or* a methodology to ensure the voices of parents that have historically been absent as such meetings are elevated.
- Makes the Maryland General Assembly an ally of all manner of abusive parents/guardians by finding that no information about the health and well-being of a minor should be withheld from the child's parent/guardian.
 - Poses conflicts for mandated reporters of child abuse in schools when the abuse is coming from the student's home; undermines the authority of public schools to act *in loco parentis*.
- Sets a precedent for some Marylanders to act outside of the law based on biological/legal relationships, blatantly violating the privacy, security, and autonomy of growing students.
 - At a time when school systems are "losing" their children through family transiency and the compounding impacts of increasing poverty, attention should be focused on finding children in unsafe situations, not giving blanket authority to parents/guardians to do as they will "without interference" from child welfare agencies.

The maltreatment of children in Maryland was increasing sharply ahead of the data collection and validation challenges posed by the differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Marylanders. The 2020 Child Maltreatment Report from the US Department of Health and Human Service found some things we knew—that states "lost" children in care early on in the pandemic and have struggled to find

them again—and some things we didn't, like the fact that Black children are abused and neglected at three times the rate of white children, even as there was a 4% overall decrease in the deaths overall. Bills like House Bill 618 that seek to separate public institutions from the happenings of private family lives always allow the horrors suffered by the most vulnerable and marginalized among us to continue without being challenged.

Strong Schools Maryland works to build power with directly impacted Marylanders—including a diverse range of parents in every corner of the state—to ensure we can collectively shape the world-class system of education we're stringing for. House Bill 618 will not get us there; it will complicate the already complex journey we face to create world-class school for *all* students. Therefore, we urge an unfavorable report on the bill.

If you have questions or requests for additional information, you can email:

Shamoyia Gardiner
Executive Director
shamoyia@strongschoolsmaryland.org