

Testimony from Anikwenze Ogbue, City Schools Parent, District 43 Resident
SB 31 - Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners - Student Members and
Task Force to Study Compensation and Student Members
Before the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

1/23/23

Position: FAVORABLE with amendments

Good afternoon members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

My name is Anikwenze Ogbue and I'm a District 43 resident. I support SB 31 because it aims to increase the amount of student members on the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners from one to two, to give those student members full voting rights and the ability to participate in closed/executive sessions, to revise the process by which those students are chosen to be more democratic, and to establish a commission to research and make recommendations on board member compensation.

SB 31 enhances the role of the student members on the Board of School Commissioners by giving them the ability to vote on all matters afforded to adult board members and to participate in closed/executive sessions. This is not a new phenomenon in Maryland where student members on boards of education in Anne Arundel and Montgomery counties have had full or near full voting rights since 1975 and 2016, respectively.^{1,2} Also, the Supreme Court of Maryland recently ruled that student members serving on the boards of education does not run afoul of the Maryland Constitution.³

Baltimore City Public Schools students and the student board members that represent them are bright, capable, and ready for any challenge. Student board members can understand complex issues and budgets with integrity and thoughtfulness because they know how decisions directly impact the student body. Board policies are clear about how adult *and* student board members must address conflicts of interest. However, to address concerns about impartiality I recommend an amendment that adds non-family members to current Board Policy GBEG Nepotism which only requires board members to disqualify themselves from votes or actions involving *immediate* family members.⁴ A good example of this is captured in Howard County Board of Education Policy 7020 - Nepotism which requires board member recusal for matters involving family and non-family members.⁵

Increasing the number of student members on the Board of School Commissioners from one to two has great benefits. The added peer support and leadership development that comes from having two student members better prepares them to serve successfully and represent a broader range of student perspectives. The two student members composition is currently in place on school boards in Caroline, Dorchester, Talbot and Queen Anne's counties.⁵

Providing every student from grades 6-12 with the ability to vote during student board member elections offers several tangible benefits. The annual election process builds a habit of real civic engagement at a young age. Participation is not contingent on whether a student's school has a SGA. This ensures that a broader range of student voices are considered in the selection of student board members. Precedence for this exists in Montgomery County Public Schools, where all 6-12 grade students can vote for the student board member.⁷

The bill also creates a commission to study the compensation for school board members. I believe that the work of school board commissioners is so critical to a bright future for Baltimore City that adults *and* students serving in these roles must be compensated. Our city is one of two jurisdictions in Maryland where board members are not paid for their vital work. The other 22 counties that compensate board members range from the poorest to wealthiest in Maryland and do so with a hundredth of a percent of their district's budget as permitted by MSDE.⁸ When board members are paid, they can dedicate more time and energy to this work. Compensation also opens these positions to residents who earn less income with less flexible jobs.

I would like to offer one amendment which sets the dates for the student commissioner's one-year term to begin on July 1, and the elected commissioners four-year term to begin on the first Monday in December after the November general election. This change would align Baltimore City with other counties in Maryland and give these commissioners more time to get onboarded and acclimated for their new roles. Currently, the lack of specific dates for these terms meant that our most recent student commissioner began serving on December, 13, 2022 (about three months after the beginning of the school year) and our two new elected commissioners will be sworn in on January 27, 2023 (about two months after their peers in other counties).^{9,10}

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB31.

Sincerely,

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