

**Testimony from Salimah Jasani, District 43A Resident, Former Baltimore City
Public Schools Teacher, and National Education Consultant**

**SB0031 - Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners – Student Members and
Task Force to Study Compensation and Student Members**

Before the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

1/24/23

Position: FAVORABLE

Dear members of the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee.

My name is Salimah Jasani, and I'm a Baltimore City District 43A resident. I'm writing to give my full support of SB0031 to give student members of the board expanded voting rights, the ability to participate in closed/executive sessions, to alter 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 and adding a second student member of the board.

This bill is of enormous importance to me as an educator and as someone who has built and maintained relationships with many extraordinary Baltimore City students over the years. In addition to having taught here, I have served the City for many years through my leadership in organizations such as Baltimoreans for Educational Equity. I recently ran for one of the elected seats on the Baltimore City Board of Commissioners, and while I was not ultimately elected, I had even more opportunities to get to know both our incredible students and the adults that dedicate their lives to the upliftment of those students. I recognize that all of us – educators, district leaders, Board members, and elected officials – are in this work for the right reasons, and I hope that my testimony today can add a layer of nuance to this conversation.

In my job as an education consultant, **I specialize in responsive strategic planning and community engagement.** I have led school districts around the country in developing a new strategic direction that meets the needs of all constituents in their communities, including students, families, staff, leaders, and community members. I want to share with you a recent anecdote from my experiences that I see echoed in our students' experiences in Baltimore City.

I recently led a school district through a community engagement process. Part of this process included hosting focus groups for various constituent groups (students, teachers, parents, etc.) . A question I asked in each focus group was whether those present believed that students felt physically and psychologically safe at school, particularly students who belonged to marginalized groups. **The teachers in the focus groups unanimously felt that adults had created an environment of safety for students.** Many of them cited the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) that had been established a few years prior as evidence that their LGBTQ students had

places where they belonged. One of them said, “it’s so much better than 20 years ago when we were in school.” Another said, “I think there used to be problems, but now that there is a GSA, our LGBTQ students are comfortable in their own skin.”

In the student focus groups, however, those same students reported vastly different experiences. A student said that they specifically did not feel safe because they were a member of the LGBTQ community. Another said that they had experienced bullying of LGBTQ students by their peers, but staff never seemed to notice. A third said, the bullying and fear mongering “is out of control at the high school.”

This anecdote illustrates what I have found to be true across my work with school districts, including Baltimore City Public Schools: despite our best intentions, **we as adults cannot make decisions in the best interest of students without their input.** In the anecdote I shared, my team was able to push for the district’s strategic plan to include a focus area on Inclusion and Belonging, and because there were students on the steering team developing these focus areas, they were able to validate that need. Without those students or the students who participated in our focus groups, the adults working on the plan would certainly not have chosen to include this as a pillar of their plan; they wouldn’t have seen the need.

Our students are uniquely situated to have input - and more explicitly, to have a vote - in the decisions that impact them. If we are truly committed to their betterment and the systemic improvement of Baltimore City Schools, then giving the student member of the board voting rights is one of the most essential tools in our toolbox. Take it from someone who helps districts improve for a living: **amplifying student voice is always a key milestone for districts that end up achieving transformational change.**

It is also worth noting that this bill already reflects a significant compromise. We met with members of the school board and the mayor’s office over multiple years in good faith discussions after pulling the bill two sessions ago that would have more dramatically restructured the school board. Their concerns and ideas were incorporated into this legislation to ensure that we can move towards a more democratic, transparent, youth centric and effective board.

For this reason, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB0031 without amendments or alterations. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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