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March 26, 2024

Written Testimony for HB1061/SB0892

Position: Support

Chairperson and Committee members,

My name is Tara Dunsmore. I am the President of Monocacy Montessori Communities, Inc., (MMCI). MMCI operates two public charter schools in Frederick County, Carroll Creek Montessori (CCM,) and the state's first charter school, Monocacy Valley Montessori (MVM). This year, MVM began expanding to include a high school program, also the first of its kind in Maryland. I am also a proud parent of a student at MVM. My son has attended the school since kindergarten and is now a member of the inaugural 9th grade class.

With over 3000 applicants each year, our public charter schools are approved to provide a high-quality public education in a specialized Montessori environment to a combined 858 students in grades PK3-12th grade. Our schools are staffed by more than 90 public school system employees.

Despite calling for commensurate funding, Maryland's Charter Law contains no provisions for the funding of facilities, essentially excluding public charter schools from the capital and facility maintenance funds that flow to traditional public schools. Our schools must rely on operating funds or special fundraising to pay for capital improvements, repairs, mortgages, leases or other capital costs, and every dollar spent on facilities is a dollar not spent on student services. This disparity in funding means that MMCI schools spend approximately 18% of our Per Pupil Allotment each year to pay for our facilities.

MMCI has searched for permanent facilities for our schools since their charters were established in 2002 and 2010. Faced with the rising cost of commercial real estate, continuing to lease facilities is not a financially sustainable option. In addition to rent increases, over the past 20 years we have experienced significant facility related challenges, including plumbing, heating, and cooling issues due to deferred maintenance by the property owners, even causing school closures at times. Facility needs force us to make difficult decisions each year about staffing levels, classroom materials, and student

services.

Despite these challenges, In 2023, MMCI successfully purchased and began renovating a building of its own for Monocacy Valley, after more than 20 years of searching. Carroll Creek has leased a shared commercial office space since its inception 12 years ago, and we are now under contract to purchase the building. For perspective, the total cost of our two buildings combined will be about \$30M, which is significantly less than the total cost of just one new traditional elementary school. Imagine if that \$30M were able to go straight into the classroom.

I invite you today to reflect on our experience as charter operators and help to ensure that our public charter schools are equitably and adequately funded by supporting and voting in favor of SB0892.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tara Dunsmore".

Tara Dunsmore
President, Board of Trustees
Monocacy Montessori Communities, Inc.