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Ways and Means Committee



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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I extend my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to address you today and present testimony in support of House Bill 1076. This bill is crucial in ensuring equitable access to education for all blind and visually impaired students across Maryland, particularly concerning their timely access to textbooks and instructional materials at the onset of each academic year, aligning their educational opportunities with those of their sighted peers.

As of present, there are approximately 1,600 blind and low-vision students enrolled in K-12 education within Maryland. Many of these students require textbooks provided in formats other than standard print, such as large print or Braille, to effectively engage with their learning materials.

In acknowledgment of this need, the Maryland General Assembly enacted the Braille Literacy Rights and Education Act in 1992, mandating the coordination of alternate format textbooks by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). The establishment of the Maryland Instructional Resource Center (MIRC) was a significant step, serving as a centralized hub for storing and disseminating alternative format textbooks to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) statewide.

However, despite legislative efforts, challenges persist. While the 2006 legislation aimed to facilitate the acquisition of textbooks in alternative formats, the financial responsibility for

production falls on the initial requesting LEA. Consequently, some LEAs opt not to incur these costs, leading to disparate access to educational materials based on geographic location within the state.

Compounding this issue, the production process for alternative format textbooks is intricate and time-consuming. Conversion from standard print to formats such as Braille or large print necessitates specialized expertise and meticulous quality control measures. Delays often arise due to the unavailability of textbooks in electronic formats or the cumbersome process of requesting NIMAS versions from publishers.

As a result, blind and low-vision students frequently experience significant delays or complete lack of access to essential textbooks, placing them at a severe educational disadvantage compared to their sighted peers.

House Bill 1076 presents a proactive approach to address these disparities through three key amendments to existing legislation:

1. **Financial Coverage for Alternative Format Production:** The bill mandates that if instructional materials are unavailable in specialized formats at MIRC or through other means, Maryland State Department of Education must cover the costs of producing materials in Braille or large print.

2. **Establishment of Textbook Selection Deadline:** LEAs will be required to finalize textbook selections for the upcoming school year by January 15th, providing ample time for procurement and production of alternative format textbooks.
3. **Publisher Requirement for NIMAS Format:** Publishers selling textbooks to Maryland entities must provide electronic NIMAS formats at the time of purchase, streamlining the production process and ensuring timely access to materials.

Additionally, HB1076 includes metrics reporting requirements to enhance transparency and accountability regarding the provision of accessible materials to blind and low-vision students.

In essence, this bill represents a fundamental step towards ensuring educational equity for all Maryland students, regardless of visual impairment. By closing existing loopholes and streamlining processes, HB1076 aims to provide blind and low-vision students with the same opportunities for academic success as their sighted counterparts.

I urge the committee's favorable consideration and support for House Bill 1076. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

Respectfully,

Delegate Denise Roberts