

Written Testimony

Bill: SB1091 Education - Blind and Visually Impaired Students - Textbook Equity

Date: February 21, 2024

To: Brian J. Feldman and Members of the Senate Education, Energy, and Environment

Committee

Dear Chair Feldman and Honorable Members of the Committee,

My name is W. Robert Hair, and I am the Superintendent of The Maryland School for the Blind. With great respect and urgency, I submit this testimony in support of SB1091, Education - Blind and Visually Impaired Students - Textbook Equity. This legislation is critical for addressing the significant challenges that students with visual impairments encounter in accessing equitable educational resources. I am grateful for the opportunity to share our insights and experiences, particularly focusing on the braille textbook ordering aspect of this bill.

The Maryland Instructional Resource Center (MIRC) at The Maryland School for the Blind, a partnership between the Department of Education and our institution, plays a pivotal role in this endeavor. MIRC is a central hub for providing accessible educational materials and support to students with visual impairments across Maryland. It maintains an extensive library of specialized materials, including braille books, tactile graphics, and educational kits, available for loan to students and educators. Furthermore, MIRC produces and distributes a wide array of accessible materials, such as braille, large print, and digital textbooks, to ensure that students with visual impairments have equal access to the curriculum. Additionally, MIRC is responsible for ordering braille books on behalf of local educational agencies to meet the educational needs of these students.

Braille textbooks, particularly for subjects like math, can be prohibitively expensive, potentially exceeding \$20,000 to \$50,000 for a single copy. This places a significant financial burden on local school systems responsible for funding these essential resources. While MIRC exists to house and protect these expensive textbooks for student use, the financial responsibility for acquiring these books ultimately falls on the local school system. This can lead to challenges in providing equitable education for students with visual impairments, as local school systems may be forced to decline purchasing braille textbooks due to budget constraints. As a result, students may receive a haphazard presentation of materials, using magnifiers or receiving only small portions of the text in braille, which can significantly impact their learning.

A recent incident underscores the challenges local educational agencies face in providing accessible materials for students with visual impairments. A request for a braille textbook intended for the 2024-2025 school year is currently pending due to budgetary considerations, requiring approval from higher authorities. This delay in approval not only puts the availability of the textbook at risk but also has direct implications for the student's education. If the request is ultimately canceled due to cost constraints or if the braille production process is significantly delayed, the student may not receive their braille materials in a timely manner, hindering their ability to keep pace with their classmates and fully participate in the learning process.

In another situation, due to a delayed decision regarding the math curriculum by the local school system, the approval for textbook purchases was finalized in late June. Although our braille vendor has been working diligently to produce these textbooks, they are not able to keep pace with the classroom schedule. Consequently, by the time the braille textbooks arrived, the classes had progressed beyond the units covered in the volumes produced. This unfortunate delay left several of the braille-reading students without their necessary math textbooks when they are needed most in the classroom.

As a result, our Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) were compelled to spend valuable instructional time transcribing braille materials and creating tactile graphics for these students. It is important to note that this LEA was still paying for the cost of braille transcription, even though the student had not received the textbook when needed in the classroom. This cycle is repeated most school years by one LEA or another, directly related to the late curriculum decisions being made by LEAs. This further emphasizes the need for SB1091 to ensure timely and equitable access to educational materials for students with visual impairments.

In conclusion, SB1091 Education - Blind and Visually Impaired Students - Textbook Equity is a vital legislative effort aimed at ensuring that students with visual impairments receive equitable access to educational materials. By addressing the challenges of high costs, delayed production, and the resulting educational disparities, this bill seeks to create a more inclusive learning environment. It underscores the importance of providing timely and accessible textbooks to support the academic success and full participation of blind and visually impaired students in the educational system. I urge the committee to support this bill and help ensure that all students have the resources they need to succeed.

Sincerely,

W. Robert Hair
Superintendent
The Maryland School for the Blind