



**State and Local Parks – Play Area Accessibility – Communication Boards
HB0420 – In Support
Testimony of the Autism Society of Maryland
Melissa Rosenberg, Executive Director
February 12, 2024**

My name is Melissa Rosenberg, Executive Director of the Autism Society of Maryland, formerly the Howard County Autism Society. I am honored to come before you this afternoon in support of HB0420 which would bring more Communication Boards to our state and local parks, increasing play area accessibility for all children.

When we talk about inclusion in our state, we want inclusion to start at the earliest stages of development – on the playground - so that Maryland’s children grow up with that expectation. Of course, we are inclusive on playgrounds. Of course, we are inclusive in the classroom. Of course, we are inclusive in universities, and in the workplace, and in the community. It is a mindset for a lifetime.

In October of 2020, the Autism Society celebrated the installation of the first of eight new Communication Boards at Waverly Elementary School in Ellicott City. The first of their kind in Maryland, they were designed to assist students who are non-speaking play more freely and inclusively on the playground with peers and without their augmentative and alternative communication devices, or AACs, in tow. The boards were a gift from our organization to the Howard County Public School System and its children. Today, they are on every elementary school playground in Howard County.

We donated similar boards for two county playgrounds – Blandair and North Centennial - in partnership with the Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks. These boards also include braille in addition to visual images for greater inclusivity. Last fall we gifted interior boards for all branches of the Howard County Library and Cedar Lane School in Fulton, MD. Together with our partners at the Arc of Maryland and with support from the Hussman Foundation, we created a video that explains what the boards are and how they work. I’ve included a link to that as well as photos of existing boards in my testimony.

We happily share this because that’s what inclusion is all about. We’ve had calls from all over the state, the country and even outside of the U.S. from folks who have seen the boards on our social media or website and want to know how to bring them to their community playground.

And they do work.



Last spring I was at Laura’s Play for All Playground in Blandair Park with a local official and two young boys were by one of the boards, looking and pointing. One of them took my hand and led me to the board, showing ME how to point to the images and then to items on the playground – the slide, the swings – so that I, too, would know how to use the boards. You just can’t make these things up.

To use the communication boards, children point to pictures on the display to express their thoughts and feelings. The symbols on the board were originally taken from a communication product called TouchChat and were selected by speech-language pathologists specifically for use on playgrounds. They can be customized to include symbols that are appropriate for many settings – the playground, a library, a public pool. And they benefit those for whom English is not their first language, providing visual access for even more children.

Go to any playground where communication boards live, and you will see similar moments of connection between peers. They certainly bring awareness to AACs, increasing equity for children with learning and communication differences. By using these boards, children no longer need to carry their personal AAC devices with them on the playground, which is just awkward. Exposure to these signs for neurotypical children is just as beneficial so they can communicate with peers who use AAC systems.

One-third of individuals with Autism will be non-speaking at some point in their lives, and perhaps for a lifetime. It is not an indication of IQ, interest in having social connections, or just enjoying an afternoon on the playground.

While the Autism Society is fully in support of having boards on every playground in Maryland, we know there is a cost associated with doing so since we’ve now spent several thousand dollars on the boards, installation and video. With so many competing needs, we hope funds will be in place for new playgrounds as well as a pipeline to funding – perhaps through foundations, public fundraising, or gifts from organizations such as ours.

The Autism Society encourages your support of HB0420. With amenities like these communication boards, Maryland will serve as a model for how parks can and should be built with every member of the community in mind.

Thank you!



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Dedication of Boards at Blandair Park in Columbia, MD (2021)



Dedication of boards at Waverly Elementary School in 2020 and Howard County Public Library in 2023.

LINK TO YOUTUBE VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DpKoy2bTxQ>

LINK TO OUR WEBSITE: <https://autismsocietymd.org/resources/ausom-resources/communication-boards-building-inclusive-playgrounds/>