

Education Advocacy Coalition
for Students with Disabilities

HOUSE ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL 420: EDUCATION—STATE AND LOCAL PARKS—PLAY AREA ACCESSIBILITY—
COMMUNICATION BOARDS

FEBRUARY 14, 2024

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Education Advocacy Coalition for Students with Disabilities (EAC), a coalition of more than 40 organizations and individuals concerned with education policy for students with disabilities in Maryland, submits this testimony in support of House Bill 420, which would require the governing body responsible for constructing play areas to construct a communication board in each newly constructed play area under its jurisdiction. The governing body can build a communication board in an existing play area under its jurisdiction when making alterations to the play area.

Communication boards, defined in House Bill 420 as devices that display photos, symbols, or illustrations to enable individuals with limited language skills to express themselves, can provide much-needed accessibility to children with disabilities, empowering them to relay their wishes effectively and independently. Although physical access to playgrounds remains an issue for many children and is a separate issue of concern for EAC members, we also recognize that once on a playground, children with disabilities often are deprived of the ability to express choices, such as what game a group of children should play during recess. Installation of communication boards will be a helpful step towards furthering meaningful inclusion of children with disabilities by giving them language support to participate with their peers without disabilities. It is essential that these boards be accessible to all children; for this reason, any communication boards installed on playgrounds must also include nonvisual access and must be installed at a height that makes them accessible to all children. We strongly support the amendment that would revise the definition of communication board to say: **“COMMUNICATION BOARD” MEANS A DEVICE THAT DISPLAYS PHOTOS, SYMBOLS, OR ILLUSTRATIONS WITH WORDS AND BRAILLE TO SUPPLEMENT OR REPLACE SPOKEN LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION. TO ENABLE INDIVIDUALS WITH LIMITED LANGUAGE SKILLS TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES AND COMMUNICATE.**

We trust that implementation of House Bill 420 would be in accord with best practices, including guidance available from organizations that have been working on playground communication board and accessibility issues.

For these reasons, the EAC supports House Bill 420. For more information, please contact Leslie Seid Margolis, Co-Chairperson, at 443-692-2505 or at lesliem@disabilityrightsmd.org.

Respectfully submitted,

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Additionally, the Maryland Education Coalition joins this testimony.