



Maryland Youth Advisory Council
c/o Governor's Office of Crime
Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services
100 Community Place,
Crownsville, MD 21032

Grace Minakowski, *Chair*
Will O'Donnell, *Vice-Chair*
Folashade Epebinu, *Secretary*

February 7, 2024

Re: HB 456 | County Boards of Education – Student Members – Voting Rights and Participation in Executive Sessions

Dear Chair Atterbeary and Members of the Ways and Means Committee

The Maryland Youth Advisory Council prides itself on being a coalition of diverse young advocates and leaders who serve as a voice for youth in the state of Maryland. As leaders in our communities, and as appointees of the Governor, President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, Maryland Association of Student Councils, Maryland Higher Education Commission and the University System of Maryland, we take every opportunity to address relevant issues by influencing legislation, spreading public awareness and serving as a liaison between youth and policymakers regarding issues facing youth.

The inclusion of student voices in educational decision-making processes is not just beneficial; but essential for creating learning environments that are responsive to the needs of all stakeholders, from students, to parents, and teachers. **HB 456** recognizes the valuable perspective that students bring to discussions on educational policy and school administration, rightfully enhancing our ability to contribute meaningfully in conversations affecting our future.

HB 456 proposes to amend current limitations on the voting rights of student members of the board, empowering these future leaders to vote on a wider range of matters affecting their constitutions—to provide actual, impactful, change.¹ This expansion is a necessary step towards bettering Maryland schools. In fact, a recent study suggested through analysis of 67 schools in Philadelphia, that student voice improves student engagement through better teacher care, competence, and overall feelings of belonging.² Furthermore, students who thought their schools to be responsive to their critiques, on average, had better grades and attendance.³ In 1975, Anne Arundel County became the *first* local board in the nation to afford full voting rights to a student member—creating a heightened sense of engagement and worth among students. Maryland is a leading state in education, which means we have the responsibility to set an example and accelerate education for both our young Marylanders and onlookers, just as Anne Arundel County did in 1975, and as other jurisdictions are now beginning to do.

¹ Cai, Jinghong. 2021. “Students Serving on School Boards: Democratic Education in Action.” [Www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org). National School Boards Association. February 4, 2021.
<https://www.nsba.org/Perspectives/2021/Students-Serving-on-School-Boards>.

² Conner, Jerusha, Michael Posner, and Bright Nsowaa. 2022. “The Relationship between Student Voice and Student Engagement in Urban High Schools.” *The Urban Review* 54 (5). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-022-00637-2>.

³ Kahne, Joseph, Benjamin Bowyer, Jessica Marshall, and Erica Hodgkin. 2022. “Is Responsiveness to Student Voice Related to Academic Outcomes? Strengthening the Rationale for Student Voice in School Reform.” *American Journal of Education* 128 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1086/719121>.

HB 456 not only emphasizes and addresses the current disparities in representation, but also underlines the need to empower youth stakeholders to carry their voices. As demonstrated by bodies like the Maryland Youth Advisory Council, young people are not apathetic to the decisions made by our adult leaders and have adequate knowledge to participate politically. By enabling student board members access to greater voting rights, we recognize their capability to contribute meaningfully to education discourse, ensuring that student voices are heard and considered throughout the decision-making process. The Council has voted in favor of endorsing **HB 456**, as it aligns with the Council’s Legislative Platform supporting:

- a. The appointment, elections, and rights of youth representatives (Article I. Youth Representation; Clauses B-F);
- b. The establishment of youth leadership positions in government (Article II. Youth Leadership; Clause D) and;
- c. Encouraging discourse between youth stakeholders regarding the well-being of students and the availability of resources (Article IV. Health and Social Issues; Clause P)

The Maryland General Assembly has the opportunity to pass impactful legislation that will lead Maryland to champion a proven model of student engagement, providing youth with the resources necessary to lead a brighter, more intelligent, and inclusive future for generations. For these reasons, the Council adamantly supports **HB 456**, and respectfully requests a favorable report from the committee. We thank you for your consideration of our position.

Sincerely,



Grace Minakowski, Chair
Maryland Youth Advisory Council