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Delegate Ben Barnes
Appropriations Committee
Maryland State Legislature
House Office Building Room 121
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Subject: Testimony in Support of House Bill 006 – Maryland Higher Education Commission – Demographic Data Collection – Parental Status

I am Nina Owolabi, a higher education researcher and working board member of the Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative, a values-driven, action-oriented community that seeks to support research, policy and direct services for student parents. I am also a current doctoral candidate and student parent living in Charles County, Maryland. I am writing to express my strong support of HB 006. This critical bill extends the important efforts of HB 0840 to ensure accountability for supporting parenting students not only as they pursue their collegiate journeys but also as they etch a pathway for their families to thrive.

HB 006 is another vital step toward a deeper understanding of the needs of student-parents and their families, driving policy and resource allocation to ensure accountability and efficiency. HB006 will ensure that student-parents facing systemic barriers to higher education are seen and heard so that they may be effectively supported.

Counting Student Parents Critical to Supporting Student Parents

My research specifically looks at the Black experience in community colleges. Scholarship underscores the number of Black student parents attending community colleges. In Maryland, Black students are a key population, making up nearly 30% of all community college students.¹ However, there is no reliable, state-specific student parent data across postsecondary institutions. Almost half of all Black student parents attend community colleges nationwide,

¹ Maryland Higher Education Commission. "Interactive Data Dashboards," n.d. <https://mhec.maryland.gov/About/Pages/Dashboards.aspx>.

with 46% choosing public two-year colleges. With such a sizeable and significant population, we cannot ignore the specific experiences of Black parenting students.

Nationally, nearly three out of ten Black undergraduate students are also parents.² How will we know who our student parents are and what their needs entail if we do not have consistent mechanisms to collect that information? Collecting Maryland data would help tremendously in identifying the student parents and offering them targeted support.

Times are especially tight, tough, and uncertain for families, especially for student parents. Federal programs that support families are shifting or being gutted. The reality is that Black communities are being hit particularly hard, with unemployment at some of the highest levels since the pandemic.³ Some 36% of Black student parents could not come up with \$500 next month, more than one-third are food insecure, and 41% already rely on SNAP benefits.⁴ Further, research suggests that this data does not capture the full scope of student parents who may be in need but are unaware of their eligibility for programs that could support their livelihoods.⁵ As research elevates, public benefit programs are complex to navigate, with complicated eligibility requirements, documentation, and application procedures.⁶ HB 006 establishes an important link to institutional resources that can provide an essential lifeline amid such political uncertainties and convoluted application processes, for Black student parents and so many others.

Currently diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are being attacked and dismantled amid recent federal policy and political discourse.⁷ Supporting student parents broadly is one effective method of simultaneously addressing some of the needs of Black students. By

² Anderson, Theresa, Sheron Gittens, and Kate Westaby. "Infographic: Black Undergraduate Student Parents." SPARK Collaborative, September 30, 2024. <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/infographic-black-undergraduate-student-parents>.

³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age." *Economic News Release*, January 9, 2026. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.t02.htm>.

⁴ Anderson, Gittens, and Westaby, "Infographic: Black Undergraduate Student Parents."

⁵ Ryberg, Renee, and Christina Padilla. "Student Parents Combine Studying, Working, and Public Programs to Support Their Families While in School." SPARK Collaborative, September 30, 2025. <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/student-parents-combine-studying-working-and-public-programs>.

⁶ Rios, Leslie, Carrie R. Welton, and Mark Huelsman. "The State of State Choices: A National Landscape Analysis of Postsecondary Eligibility Restrictions and Opportunities in SNAP, CCDF, and TANF." The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs, May 6, 2024. <https://hope.temple.edu/public-benefits-eligibility-students>.

⁷ HCM Strategists, Achieving the Dream, and Equity Avengers. "LEVEL UP: Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, Unapologetically." Black Learner Excellence and Success in Higher Ed, 2023. <https://blacklearnersuccess.com/publications>.

prioritizing student parent data collection, Maryland can join the ranks of other states leading the way to ensure the success of all their postsecondary students⁸.

At the SPARK Collaborative,⁹ we use data, research, lived expertise, and past learning to inform policy and practice solutions while developing future generations of leaders. We believe that intentional data collection is a necessary step to understand how to support student parents in meaningful ways. The work does not stop at data collection, but data are critical to inform programming, curriculum, and resource allocation efficiently. SPARK’s recent basic needs and social safety net research elevates how institutions of higher education can be particularly supportive of student parents by doing exactly what HB 006 empowers administrators to do— help student parents learn and connect to public programs¹⁰ and build “stronger partnerships between colleges and agencies that provide public programs can improve access to vital resources.”¹¹ By pursuing this legislation, the House Assembly is cementing its commitment to making it possible for the student parents of Maryland to complete their programs, get good jobs, and support their families.

Thank you for your consideration.

⁸ Anderson, Theresa. “Testimony in Support of House Bill 0298 – Maryland Higher Education Commission – Demographic Data Collection – Parental Status.” *Urban Institute*, January 31, 2025. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/testimony-support-house-bill-0298-maryland-higher-education-commission>.

⁹SPARK Collaborative. “SPARK Collaborative,” December 10, 2025. <https://studentparentaction.org/>.

¹⁰ SPARK Collaborative. “Meeting Student Parents’ Basic Needs,” <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/student-parents-basic-needs>

¹¹ Anderson, Theresa, Renee Ryberg, Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Kimberly Salazar, Shaquita Christian, and Fatou Sy. “Supporting Parenting Students Through College—Basic Needs Partnerships.” SPARK Collaborative, September 30, 2025. <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/supporting-parenting-students-through-college-basic-needs-partnerships>.