

TESTIMONY OF DYOTHA SWEAT

President, Charles County Branch NAACP

before the

**MARYLAND STATE SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND
ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

on

**SB 830, EDUCATION – ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS –
REPORTING REQUIREMENTS**

March 3, 2020

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Good Morning esteemed members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. My name is Dyotha Sweat and I am the President of the Charles County Branch of the NAACP. Thank you for calling this important hearing and for allowing me to share with you the Charles County NAACP's position on this crucial piece of legislation.

The CCNAACP strongly supports SB 830, Education – Alternative Schools – Reporting Requirements, and we urge for its swift enactment.

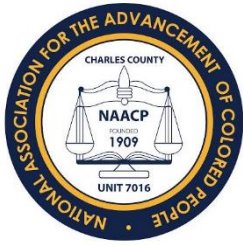
At the heart of this debate are questions of equity, fairness, and meaningful access to stable educational opportunities for all Maryland students.

I am honored to be here today to discuss the positive impact that SB 830 can have upon avoiding negative outcomes for Maryland students, ensuring transparency and promoting accountability related to alternative schools.

Avoiding Hurtful Educational Outcomes for Maryland Students

First, the passage of SB 830 is vital to ensure that Maryland avoids hurtful outcomes for Maryland students eligible for placement, or currently placed in alternative schools. Nearly all school systems in Maryland operate alternative schools or programs for children with behavior challenges and children who have been suspended or expelled.

Closer at home in Charles County, the Elementary Alternative Program, “Fresh Start Academy,” is a stand-alone segregated school for K-2nd graders who are identified by the CCPS Superintendent Kimberly Hill as children who suffer from “behavior challenges.” The Charles County NAACP has raised serious concerns about the potential for negative outcomes for students placed in these types of alternative educational settings.



School exclusion at the earliest stages of a child's educational career can cause severe and sustained harm. National research has shown that attending behavior-focused alternative schools is significantly associated with earning fewer credits, lower attendance, and higher suspension rates than attending regular schools.¹ Early grades are a critical time of intellectual, social, and emotional development. Separating young students from their regular school environment denies them opportunities to learn academic and social skills in their neighborhood schools. It prohibits key, necessary interactions with a diverse group of students of varying skill levels. Further, educators and other trained professionals are blocked from addressing underlying causes of behavioral concerns at this crucial, early stage.

Because alternative schools can potentially play a strong role in depriving students of educational, social and emotional growth during their formative years, it is vital that placing young students in an alternative schools like Fresh Start Academy is a resolution of last resort after exhausting all available measures.

Ensuring Transparency

In addition, because of the risk of grave harm inherent in placing students outside of their regular educational environment, there should be readily available statistical data that demonstrates that schools are placing students in these schools in a fair, unbiased and equitable manner.

Without the necessary statistics, it becomes far more difficult to demonstrate that this incursion on the learning process is necessary, follows appropriate and legal procedures, and is based upon objective criteria. However, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) does not collect or report centralized data or information on alternative schools, such as their educational programming, staffing, student assignment procedures, student demographics, and academic outcomes.

For Charles County Public School's Fresh Start Academy, it is important that this data is publicly available. Even in its initial implementation, the FSA supporters and proponents never clearly articulated the statistical data that supported their belief that such a program was necessary. Nor has the Charles County School District provided any data regarding the students placed in the school- not even how many students were currently enrolled.

And knowledge regarding these statistics is vital to ensure that students of color and those with disabilities are being treated in a fair and equitable manner. Alternative Schools have the potential to cause a disproportionate impact on African American students and students with disabilities. During the 2017-2018 school year, African American students made up 55% of the total student population in CCPS, but they comprised 79% of students who were suspended or expelled at least once. Students

¹ Wilkerson, K. L., Afacan, K., Perzigian, A. B., Justin, W., & Lequia, J. (2016). Behavior-focused alternative schools: Impact on student outcomes. *Behavioral Disorders*, 41(2), 81-94.

with disabilities made up 12% of the total student population, but they comprised 19% of students who were suspended or expelled at least once.²

Clearly, there is a grave disparity among students of colors and those with disabilities placed on suspensions and expelled in Charles County Public Schools. It follows then, there is a much higher chance that students of color and those with disabilities will stand a higher likelihood of placement within FSA. For this reason, SB 830 is necessary to ensure that the public has the necessary data to assess whether bias is occurring in Charles County alternative schools.

Promotes Accountability

Passage of SB 830 is also essential to promote accountability for Maryland Schools, including the Charles County Public Schools System.

Anecdotally, the CCNAACP has been made aware of issues within the FSA, however, we lack the data to definitively prove their existence. Of gravest concern, we have been hearing reports that students in alternative schools are not getting the educational and support services that they need.

These reports become especially troubling given that CCPS plans to expand its alternative school FSA from K-2 students to K-5. The FY21 publicly available budget request for Fresh Start – January 2021 – includes mentions about doubling their student population by three grades. CCPS says the expansion is necessary, but has not provided data to support their contentions.

In addition, FSA has yet to provide any clear measures or data related to its current success. How can the public fully evaluate the program if CCPS does not provide detailed budget data or justifications, statistical data related to its student population or metrics related to student educational outcomes? This lack of data also renders holding CCPS accountable for students' success, the equitable treatment of their students, and their use of taxpayers' funds virtually impossible.

The collection of data such as educational programming, staffing, student assignment procedures, student demographics, and academic outcomes, are all necessary to ensure accountability for the positive educational outcomes of our most vulnerable students. For all of these reasons, esteemed members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, we strongly urge the passage of SB 830. Thank you.

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² Suspensions, Expulsions, and Health Related Exclusions, Maryland Public Schools, 2017-2018, Maryland State Department of Education, September 2018, <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20172018Student/2018SuspExpulHRExc.pdf>