



March 3, 2020

Chair Anne Kaiser
Ways and Means Committee

Testimony in **SUPPORT** of HB1421

Dear Chair Kaiser and Committee Members,

CASA, the largest immigrant rights organization in Maryland, submit this letter outlining our **SUPPORT for HB 1421** --- Improving Equitable Access to Advanced Coursework--- which requires districts to automatically enroll students with qualifying test scores in a particular subject in advanced coursework.

In 2015, CASA along with Prince George's County Public Schools and the International Network for Public Schools opened two public high schools seeking to improve the graduation rates of immigrant, first generation students in Prince George's County in school environments that integrated mastery based learning while adopting a community school model that would provide holistic supports for each student. In 2019, a 100 students graduated from each school. At the International High School at Langley Park, Principal Carlos Beato decided that he would offer Advanced Placement (AP) classes in the first year the school opened; this decision was based on the belief that any student regardless of language, race or ethnicity can and should be enrolled in AP coursework. All students who took the class in the first year received a score of 3 or above on the AP Spanish Language exam.

Most students at these schools fit one of two profile types: newcomer students or first-generation immigrant students. Each student profile type has unique needs, but both are underserved and face enormous challenges to success. Newcomer students are at very high risk for dropping out, after arriving in the U.S. at a later age with limited (or no) English language skills, interrupted schooling, often unstable family relationships and families separated by borders, recent trauma from their home countries and their journey (most students are fleeing horrific violence and poverty in their home countries, and many students, especially girls, are victims of sexual assault during their journey). First-generation students face different challenges – as the most bilingual members of their households, they frequently play adult roles in their families, growing up faster than their U.S. born counterparts. Because they are serving in a “parent” role to their families in navigating health care systems, landlords, and frequently employers, they often do not have the support they need to navigate the college application process. They face enormous pressure from parents who have given up everything to help them achieve the “American dream,” and frequently suffer depression and anxiety when they are not able to live up to the outsized expectations they believe their parents have for them. Both groups of students are continually navigating two worlds – the immigrant world of their parents and families, and the U.S. world of their school and community.

Despite the lived experiences of many first generation, immigrant students, most of these students have a deep desire to achieve, succeed and forge a pathway towards higher education. Yet we still hear from students who are denied access to advanced coursework, who are told by school staff that they will not succeed in those classes or simply tracked into classes that will not allow them to even show the potential they have. I know this first hand. I was the first in my family to attend and graduate from the University of Maryland College Park but I was very close to not getting there. In my junior year at Montgomery Blair High School I was told I was likely going to be overlooked by my first choice college because of my lack of advanced coursework and preparation for college. I had not received an opportunity to take rigorous and advanced coursework because I was very rarely considered by teachers or guided by a guidance counselor that I could and should take such courses. I was lucky though to have three teachers of color who were there pushing me and they took it upon themselves to provide students like myself with SAT prep courses, advanced materials in our classes and raised the expectations for all their students regardless of our racial or ethnic background. I know I was lucky to have Ms. Castro, my first and only Latina teacher in all my time in MCPS, and Ms. Campbell and Ms. Brown, both African American teachers that believed in ALL their students. I would not have persisted and made it to UMCP if not for them.

Unfortunately this experience is not unique to me. According to Education Trust data, in Maryland Black and Latino students are less likely to be enrolled in rigorous coursework despite having the needed scores to be enrolled; White students are enrolled in Algebra 1 courses at a rate of 92% while 88% of Black students and 71% of Latino students are enrolled despite having the same scores¹. Nationwide, Black and Latino students are locked out of Advanced Placement (AP). Black students make up 15% of high schoolers nationwide, but only 9% of students enrolled in at least one AP course. Nearly a quarter of students are Latino, but only 21% of students enrolled in AP courses are Latino². HB 1421 would help school districts across Maryland reduce these disparities and not leave it to luck to have more Black and Latino students enroll in courses that make a difference in their trajectories towards higher education. We urge a favorable report to HB1421.

Thank you,

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CASA

¹ Source: MCPS 17-18 Course Schedule, ERS analysis

² <https://edtrust.org/press-release/black-and-latino-students-shut-out-of-advanced-coursework-opportunities/>