

KATIE FRY HESTER
Legislative District 9
Carroll and Howard Counties

Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB770 - Ending the Digital Divide Act of 2021

March 9th, 2021

Chairman Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 770. For years, we have been aware of our education system's inequities, particularly the digital divide. Unfortunately, as digital devices have become more and more ubiquitous in our daily lives, this problem and inequity have persisted. And in the wake of the move to online learning catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this inequity has only been highlighted.

According to a survey conducted by Pew Research in early April of last year, 43% of low-income students indicated that during the coronavirus pandemic, they were at least somewhat likely to have to do their schoolwork on a cellphone. 40% answered they would have to use public Wi-Fi to finish their schoolwork due to a lack of reliable internet happen, and 36% indicated they would not be able to complete schoolwork because they do not have access to a computer at home. At the beginning of the pandemic, school systems across the State made significant efforts to meet their most critical needs, purchasing millions of dollars worth of Chromebooks for our students struggling to get access to digital devices. However, this does not solve the persistent structural problems that created this disparity in the first place.

This legislation aims to provide sufficient funding to end the digital divide and provide the technical support our students and teachers need. This bill provides \$180 of additional funding for technology resources on top of the \$7,390 already allocated per pupil under our current funding formula. Additionally, this legislation requires that each County Board use at least 7% of their target per-pupil foundation amount to provide laptops and other devices; internet connectivity; technical assistance; and information technology software, to ensure that the additional funding goes towards supplementing, not supplanting, our current IT spending allocations. Finally, SB770 requires that a county board allocating funds per this subsection

follow the IT Security standards set by the Department of Information Technology as school systems expand their own IT infrastructure utilizing this funding.

This simple bill is a vital step towards making sure our teachers and students have the resources they need to create an equitable and productive learning environment. While the Coronavirus has accelerated the adoption of technology in education, technology has been an inextricable part of our education system for quite some time. For students across Maryland, lack of access to technology is not just an inconvenience. Today, it is the difference between making it to class every day or having repeated or prolonged absence. But even beyond COVID, access to technology has a real impact on our student's ability to access digital resources for their classes, complete their assignments, and equitably access unique educational opportunities that may rely on technology for their delivery. For these reasons, **I respectfully request a favorable report on Senate Bill 770.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Fry Hester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "K" and "H".

Senator Katie Fry Hester
Carroll and Howard Counties