

Baltimoreans for Educational Equity (BEE)
Oral Testimony in Support of The Digital Connectivity Act of 2021
February 9th, 2021

To Chairperson Paul G. Pinsky, Vice Chair Cheryl C. Kagan and Members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

I'm Kelsey Ko. I am an English teacher and the Digital Equity Chair for Baltimoreans for Educational Equity (BEE).

BEE is an alliance of current and former teachers, families, students, and allies who work collectively to achieve educational equity at the district, local, and state level.

Today, I come to you on behalf of our 800 members, and on behalf of the members of over 60 statewide advocacy groups to ask for a favorable report for **Senate Bill 0066 — The Digital Connectivity Act of 2021**

The BEE Leadership team and our 800 members have, in the past, organized Marylanders to center educational equity in our policy, including:

- Securing \$30 million from Baltimore city government to fund city schools over three years.
- Partnering with advocates across the city to secure \$3 million for devices and internet to give students and their families absolutely essential internet access during the pandemic.
- Organizing with partners statewide to pass the Casino Lockbox Amendment (Question 1) and to urge policymakers to pass the Blueprint for Maryland's Future

In March, classrooms closed and overnight teachers were forced to completely reimagine what learning could look like remotely. As a 9th grade teacher, I saw the inequities that already existed become more pressing as students and their families came to fully depend on limited resources like internet connectivity to live, learn, and work.

My students struggle to stay connected during virtual instruction. For one student, her audio fails because of spotty Wi-Fi, making it frustrating for her to engage in class and come off mute. For another student, his broadband connection is unreliable in supporting his Zoom classroom, much less the individual breakout rooms that are so critical for peer-to-peer collaboration and socioemotional development. Just last week, I had a student come into my office hours, excited to engage with me and chatting with me happily off mute. However, he was frustrated and kept cutting in and out because of his Wi-Fi. How much instructional time could

be maximized if I didn't have to ask students to repeat themselves because of lost connection? These are scenarios that have been repeated time and again, from student to student over the last 10 months.

If the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021 is passed — as students, parents, teachers and activists have been advocating — it would establish the Office of Digital Inclusion and devote capacity and funding toward broadband access across Maryland.

More than just a band-aid solution, this would also lead to the collection of critical data around the root causes of digital inequity, as well as the preparation of a statewide plan to ensure that Marylanders have access to affordable and reliable internet by 2029. But our children can't afford any more wasted time in getting connected to the digital age.

If COVID-19 has shown us anything, is that in this day and age, access to the Internet is a human right. Plain and simple. And as a human right, we must fight to make it a reality for our community members that need it the most: our working class neighbors, rural and immigrant communities, as well as Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.

Without access, their lives and futures are at stake. Education, healthcare, housing, employment, all of it requires internet access these days — especially during this global pandemic — which is why closing the digital divide now and for all should be one of our greatest priorities. Maryland's future depends on it

Maryland's immense wealth and our spirited economy have not done nearly enough to provide what our children need — and not just children in Baltimore City, but in rural areas like Somerset, and Garrett, and Allegany counties. But there is hope for our kids, and it lies within each of you.

My students handle extraordinary adversity and responsibility as 14 and 15-year olds. They take on caring for their siblings and helping their parents around the house, all while navigating the grief, loss, isolation, and trials of virtual learning that this pandemic has brought about.

I ask you to empower students who shoulder so much but still soldier on — students who continue to try to access their education during these difficult times.

The children of Maryland are brilliant, resilient, and resourceful, and we do a disservice to not just those children, but to our future selves, by not equipping them with the tools they need to build the best future possible.

Please consider our future when issuing a favorable report for the Digital Connectivity Act.

Thank you.

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www.beequity.org