



Testimony offered on behalf of:

**CHRISTIE JACKSON**

**Louisiana Connections Academy, Former Special Ed Director**

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**IN SUPPORT OF:**

**SB0941 – Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – Alterations**

**Senate Education, Health & Economic Affairs Committee**

**Hearing: 3/18/2021 at 1:00 PM**

To the Senate Committee:

My name is Christie Jackson, and I am a Senior Manager of Consulting with Pearson Online & Blended Learning (POBL) Special Populations Team headquartered in Columbia, Md. My career with Pearson began in August 2011 in Baton Rouge as a Special Education Manager at Louisiana Connections Academy (LACA), one of the first statewide, full-time, tuition-free, online schools in Louisiana. It was an exciting time, to say the least. It was sure to be a wonderful school option for so many families that struggled to find an educational structure that “fit” their child. In its first year of operation, LACA enrolled 400 students. Roughly, 75 of those students were students with special needs, including students with an Individual Education Plan, Section 504 Plan, English Language Learners, and Gifted.

As we started initial conversations with families, known as Welcome Calls, we began to hear many stories from families regarding their decision to try this new school. We would hear, “My child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) but the school never involved me in any decision” or “My child was not being challenged enough” or “My child has an illness that prevents him from being able to function in a school building.” Repeatedly, we would hear families explain their reason for choosing LACA. What we realized is that each family had a specific reason. Each family made a conscious decision to take advantage of the new school option in Louisiana.

Each year of operation, enrollment increased as more families found out about LACA and the positive feedback spread throughout the State. LACA increased and reached its enrollment cap every year, resulting in having to place students on a waitlist. As LACA grew (there was a 2500 student enrollment limit or cap in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of operation), the needs of students in special populations began to expand. One year, LACA enrolled a student who was a wheelchair user with limited ability to use his upper extremities, along with other conditions. This student had difficulty in the school building due to being unable to transport himself throughout the school. He needed several accessibility tools to enable

him to work independently. He needed to be able to visit the restroom as often as possible without being a disturbance to others in his class.

The student also needed a flexible schedule that would enable him to attend doctor's appointments. Since enrolling in an online school, he was able to move about freely in his home environment. The accessibility tools that he needed included speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, a laptop with a touchscreen monitor, and a stylus, which we made readily available to the student. His teachers were able to schedule his lessons around his doctor's appointments without worrying about him falling behind. The student was no longer a disturbance to others in his class since he was now in his own home. Most importantly, his parents were able to become more involved in his education and were no longer concerned about his wellbeing in school.

There are countless stories to be shared about the students and families that have benefited from Connections Academy, not only in Louisiana but also at the other 44 Connections Academy schools across the nation. From the gifted young actress to the student who is bullied, to the student who is gendered nonconforming, Connections Academy has been the answer to students thriving and being successful while being their authentic selves. Students and families in Maryland should not be bound to traditional educational structures that are not best for their needs. They should have another school to choose from as the needs of students change over time. When traditional brick-and-mortar schools do not work, families should not have to pay for private schooling or be forced to homeschool without access to a qualified teacher.

The families in Maryland should have an online education option with a proven track record of success. **Passage of SB0941 will, undoubtedly, align with supporting the ever-changing needs of the students and families of Maryland. Please recommend a favorable report on SB0941.**

Sincerely,

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