

Testimony offered on behalf of:
AMY SPARKS

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

My name is Amy Sparks. I am a resident of Rosedale, Maryland. I am here today to **SUPPORT SB0941 – Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – Alterations.**

About 17 years ago, I had to pull my two daughters out of the public-school system due to bullying issues. They had just finished the 5th grade. I home-schooled them for middle school. I was worried about my ability to teach them high school but then, in 9th grade we were given the opportunity to participate in the Baltimore County Online Public-school pilot program. Even though the parents and students found success in the program, this program was cancelled abruptly after one year, due to Maryland law seat requirement. **We then made the decision not to return to traditional brick and mortar school but to continue in a private online school: Pearson Online Academy.** This was the best educational experience for our daughters and family. For instance, my one daughter had ADDH and was behind in reading. Her teachers were able to add extra reading classes and by the next year she was back on grade level. As for my family, my husband worked a 2 pm to 11pm shift and Pearson Online Academy allowed him to be active in their lives and education. My daughters thrived in this virtual schooling environment and went on to receive Senatorial scholarships. I am proud of my daughters' achievements. For example, one daughter now works for John Hopkins Hospital and she designed the new Skip Viragh building's network. This brings me great pride as I am a Breast cancer warrior and I receive my follow up care in that exact building. **Pearson Online Academy overwhelming worked for her.**

As for my younger two children, currently in 9th and 12th grade, we continued with Pearson Online Academy because it worked for us and we appreciated the personalized education my children received. For example, when my son was kindergarten-age, he already knew how to count and read when he enrolled. His teacher encouraged us to enroll him in 1st grade subjects. I was concerned that he would be without some reading fundamentals, but we were able to enroll him in 1st grade math with other subjects at kindergarten level.

The flexibility and the family support Pearson Online Academy provide is amazing. When I was diagnosed with Breast cancer, my children were in about the 3rd and 5th grade. I discussed with one of my children's teachers that I might need to put them in an unknown brick and mortar school, not knowing what I would be able to handle. My son's teacher replied, "We've got you. Let us help you get through this." And they did. They ensured that my children stayed on track and gave us the needed support to continue online learning.

I am happy to announce that my son is now a senior. His entire educational experience has been virtual online school, with live support from his teachers at his fingertips. I remember when he was taking Calculus last year. He called me over and asked me for help. I looked at the screen and said, without hesitation, "Sure!" I took over his mouse and clicked the school's Live Tutor button, where a tutor was available to assist him. He is currently taking extra outside Cisco classes and will be continuing to college in the fall.

Which brings me to my baby girl. Samantha is now in the 9th grade. Another curve ball hit our family this year, just as it has affected the entire world: the COVID-19 pandemic. While I have witnessed many schools thrown into what I would call “Crisis Online Learning Mode,” in my view it is not quality virtual school learning. I am relieved to say that my children’s quality education has not missed a beat. Our biggest struggle has been reminding her friends that she is not off school. She can do her classwork any time of the day or night. 6 pm happens to be the time of day when she is most productive.

I share my story with you because, throughout these 14 years, I have repeatedly been contacted with parents to find out how they can get this high-quality virtual school option. Unfortunately, it is not available as a public school in this State, while it is available in 29 other States.

Now with Covid-19, hundreds of thousands of Maryland students are in this “Crisis Online Learning” program. You are familiar with the saying, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” This holds true for a quality virtual school. Maryland teachers are doing their best, but quality virtual programs have spent over 20 years developing and evolving with new technology and learning best practices.

Our world may never get back to where it was. Even when in-person classes return, there will be a new group of lost children, who cannot or do not want to attend brick and mortar schools for health or various other reasons. What will these students do? Not everyone can afford a private online school, especially in these economic times.

It is your job to look ahead, to prepare Maryland. I plead with you to **vote to approve SB0941**. Can you imagine how well students in the State would have been served if this public schooling option had been available 14 years ago?

Hoping for the future,

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