

Testimony for SB770

The Ending The Digital Divide Act of 2021

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As a former Chief Information Officer of Prince George's County Public Schools for the past 17 years, I have had the pleasure of working with the administration to budget for information technology services for the students, staff and the school district. During those years, the school district has wired all of the schools and offices, installed wireless access points in all classrooms, cafeterias, gymnasiums, libraries, offices, bus lots, school parking lots, and administrative buildings. Annually, the school district has continued to increase the broadband bandwidth necessary and the Internet service speeds to accommodate the increase of Internet use, the services being provided, and the number of devices/people utilizing the services. The equipment that keeps the network functioning (routers, servers, switches, controllers, and access points) are refreshed every seven to ten years.

About 14 years ago, Prince George's County invested in computing devices (laptops) for all of its teaching staff and many of the instructional support staff so that they have the tools necessary to utilize the school system's online student information system. These devices are typically refreshed every five years.

Several years ago, the Maryland State Department of Education implemented online testing. Prince George's

County again planned for the implementation of Online Testing so that every student could take their tests within the administration window which required that all schools have a certain number of devices available to for testing at specific testing windows.

Budget permitting, Prince George's County Public Schools continued to increase the number of student devices annually but was still several years away from having devices for every student when COVID shut down schools last March. Anticipating the demand from all schools districts, the school system placed orders for 35,000 devices before the end of last school year and an additional 30,000 devices in July 2020. Due to the Cares Act and the Approval of the emergency funds by the Board of Education of the use of one-time funds, the school district was able to provide Internet service to thousands of families and provide devices to students.

However, there will be challenges. Without additional funds, many school districts will not be able to fund Internet access for students and maintain the computing devices resulting into going back to the pre-Covid Infrastructure. School districts need additional funds to support families that need Internet access, to maintain the equipment needed to support the district's network and increased bandwidth, to maintain staff and student devices, and provide technical support for the additional of thousands of users.

SB770 provides dedicated funding needed to support each school district's network infrastructure, provide Internet service, computing devices, software and technical support.

By providing additional funding for the network infrastructure, internet service, computing devices, software, and technical support, all students should have the tools and services they need in the classroom and at home.