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Judicial Proceedings Committee

Vice Chair, Baltimore County
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Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
The Honorable Paul G. Pinsky
2 West Miller Senate Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401-1991

RE: SB 468 – Baltimore County Board of Education – Annual Budget – Conditions on Expenditures

Dear Chairman Pinsky and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to introduce Senate Bill 468. This bill was triggered by a virtual meeting that the members of the Baltimore County Senate Delegation held with the Baltimore County Superintendent of Schools and his legal counsel last December concerning the ransomware attack on the Baltimore County School System.

For those who are not familiar with what had occurred that precipitated this meeting, the day before Thanksgiving, the Baltimore County School System was shut down by a ransomware attack that hit all its network systems. The cyberattack brought classes to a halt for days for the 115,000 students in Baltimore County. School officials publicly described it as a “catastrophic attack on our technology system”. An audit of the Baltimore County School System several years earlier had warned of vulnerabilities in the System’s computer system, and other school systems across the United States had been hit by similar ransomware attacks demanding the payment of ransom as a condition of restoring access to their computer systems. Unfortunately, the Baltimore County School System never corrected the identified deficiencies, and a new audit issued just the day before the Baltimore County attack once again found “significant risks” in the School System’s computer system. According to the new audit, the network was not adequately secured, and sensitive personal information was not properly safeguarded.

The Baltimore County Senate Delegation set up a private, confidential briefing with the School Superintendent to find out what had happened, whether any personal student or family information had been compromised and whether any taxpayer money had been paid in ransom to the hackers. What we encountered was a total stonewall. The Superintendent did not answer our questions. Rather, the Superintendent and his legal counsel responded to each question by reciting answers contained on a script. No matter how we re-worded our questions, we received

word for word the same prepared answers. To say the virtual meeting was unenlightening would be an understatement. During the meeting, several Baltimore County State Senators of the other political party sent me text messages stating “This is ridiculous”. Over two months have now passed since that Delegation meeting, and the Baltimore County School System has still not provided County elected officials with any information about the ransomware attack.

Following the meeting, I contacted one of Baltimore County’s seven County Councilmen and was told that the County Council had held their own meeting with the School Superintendent and had encountered the same stonewall. I inquired whether the County Council had any way of requiring that, as a condition of funding the School System the School Superintendent be required to provide the County Council with relevant information about the ransomware attack or other information about the operations of the County schools. He checked with the County attorney and was told that without permission from the State of Maryland, the County had no legal right to require the Superintendent provide any information about how the County School System was operating.

This bill was prepared as a reaction to what I believe is an unacceptable situation. The Baltimore County School System receives billions of dollars of taxpayer money. There must be a functioning system of transparency and accountability so that when things like ransomware attacks occur in the future, there is a mechanism in place for county elected officials to obtain needed information about what happened, why it was allowed to happen, what is being done to solve the problem and what is going to be done to ensure that the problem never recurs.

Senate Bill 468 is very short and merely grants to the Baltimore County Executive and the Baltimore County Council the same right to “fence off” money in the annual Budget of the County Board of Education that the General Assembly has to “fence off” money in the Governor’s Budget. It provides that the County Executive and County Council may prohibit the Board of Education from spending designated sums of money unless specified conditions are met. With the passage of this bill, the County Executive and County Council may, for example, provide that certain money in the School System’s Budget may not be spent unless the Board of Education takes measures to properly secure the School System’s computer network, acts to safeguard sensitive personal information of the students and their families and renders a report by a certain date about the ransomware attack.

The Baltimore County School System should not have the ability to spend billions of dollars of taxpayer money while stonewalling County elected officials about what is going on in the school system.

For these reasons, I hope that you will give SB 468 a favorable report.