

TESTIMONY OF DAVID L. CAHN, CO-CHAIR  
CITIZENS FOR AN ELECTED BOARD  
ON HOUSE BILL 624  
Before the Committee on Ways and Means  
February 5, 2021

Citizens for an Elected Board (CEB) strongly supports H.B. 624 and urges the Delegation to report it favorably to the House of Delegates.

This legislation would return control of the Prince George's County Public Schools to the voters of the county. It is designed to undo the Baker takeover of 2013, the infamous H.B. 1107, which gave the county executive the power to appoint three members to the board (the county council got one, also), select the CEO, and fill vacancies by appointment. Unlike in every other Maryland jurisdiction, it also gave the CEO the power to act unilaterally, largely free from school board oversight.

This bill would remove the appointed board members, maintain each of nine districts electing an accountable board member, and permit the elected school board to select and supervise the superintendent once again; vacancies would be filled by special election.

Prior to 2002, the voters of Prince George's County elected our school board from nine single-member districts. Rushern Baker, then chair of the Prince George's House Delegation, pushed through legislation to disenfranchise our voters and replace the elected board with one comprised of political appointees of the county executive and governor. To take the vote away from the majority-minority voters of our county was blatantly racist and could never have happened in a majority white county.

The appointed board made no significant improvement in governance or student achievement over the former elected board. It was replaced four years later by a strangely constructed board with five members each required to live in one of five giant districts plus four unrestricted seats. However, all nine members had to run at large, so the so-called district

members did not represent their districts. This structure assured partisan political control over the supposedly nonpartisan school board, as nobody could afford to spend huge sums of money to campaign for a position paying only \$18,000 per year. Endorsements, sample ballots, and partisan-directed donations were the tools of repression.

Finally, in 2008 the voters got our school board back, once again with each of nine members elected from a single district and no appointed or at-large seats. Vacancies would be filled by special election to maintain the nonpartisan nature of the board. That didn't last long, however, because in 2013 that same Rushern Baker, now county executive, got an innocuous House bill amended in the Senate in the closing days of that legislative session without the usual scrutiny by this Committee and gave himself control of the school board and CEO. The infamous H.B. 1107 was another act of blatant racism, further disenfranchising our majority-minority voters.

So, here we are again, advocating once more for a return of our public schools to full citizen control. H.B. 502-21 would do just that. It would right a grievous wrong perpetrated against our voters. By passing this bill, the General Assembly would be sending the message that it trusts the voters of Prince George's County to select the people to govern our public schools and that it believes our school system should be nonpartisan in fact, as well as in name, independent of political control and patronage.

There is nothing inherently racist about a hybrid school board. If the citizens of Prince George's County never had the vote, never had full control of their school board, it could even be seen as an initial step in the right direction. However, that is not the case here. We had the vote (2002); we had full control (2013). The racism comes from taking away votes and control of public education from citizens of color who *already had the vote and control*. These were steps backward in full citizenship, watering down the vote of the people.

This bill, on the other hand, would be a step forward. By repairing the wrongs twice foisted on our voters by those more interested in power than democracy, this bill is much more than non-racist. It is anti-racist, a positive action the General Assembly can accomplish to combat systemic racism in Prince George's County.

CEB urges the Committee to approve House Bill 624 and send it to the full House of Delegates for enactment.

Thank you.