

January 27, 2021
Ways and Means Committee
Testimony in Support of House Bill 401 (Delegate Guyton)
Public Schools - Pregnant and Parenting Students - Policies and Reports

Chair Kaiser and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jacob Harnist and I am a Middle School English teacher at Harlem Park Elementary Middle School in Baltimore City Public Schools. I am providing this testimony in strong support of HB0401. Maryland has not done its duty in supporting all students, particularly those who carry the weight of parenting. The harsh reality of the situation is that when a student becomes pregnant while pursuing their education, their chances of graduation plummet. This fact is something I believe we are all acutely aware of, yet we stand idly by while our future generations are cast out, not just to fend for themselves but also for their children.

As a teacher, I highly value the close relationships I develop with my students and their families; I consider many of them to be like younger siblings and look to support them as such. Yet, no amount of trust and love can prepare a teacher for the level of support a pregnant or parenting student needs to succeed. About two years ago I had one of my favorite 8th grade students confide in me that she was pregnant; telling me before even her own parents. Imagine me, a then 23-year-old man, trying to fathom any type of meaningful words that could support this young woman - only producing word vomit and wide-eyes. What's worse, the help I tried to provide seemed to only make things worse. I thought that informing my administration would help to connect her with support and state-led initiatives built with students in her situation in mind. Yet, what I was met with was a total lack of preparedness for this kind of situation. Instead of helping this young woman, she was ostracized from the school community, with the image of the school itself seeming more important than her and her child's future. This may not be the case at all schools, but it was the lack of direction and policy that stemmed the issue to begin with. Not having procedure and support for such a life-changing event left this student on her own - I was told that I could not help her with any support, even being forbidden from providing something as simple as prenatal vitamins. To this day I feel that I failed this child and since have felt less capable of supporting students in all situations.

What pains me even more is that I know she was not the first nor the last person to find themselves in the exact situation. Nothing pains a teacher more than seeing their students suffer in any way, especially while not knowing how to help them. As a teacher, there's a lot you have to learn on your own but I hope that the committee can see that some things are too important to not have proper guidance prepared for schools and educators.

HB 401 would require the State Department of Education to develop a model policy to support pregnant and parenting students and help improve their educational outcomes. Much of the language in the bill provides tangible outcomes to knock down barriers our pregnant and parenting students face. Things like transportation services, private locations for pumping, and even the training that the bill provides for staff members will go a long way to improve student

outcomes. Students should not be forced to rely on the limited, near non-existent, parenting capacity of a 23 year-old man that looks nothing like them. That is why I hope you all will issue a favorable report on HB 401, so that we can begin taking steps to ensure **ALL** students in Maryland have access to a quality education, no matter what circumstance they face.