



**NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF THE BLIND**
MARYLAND

Live the life you want.

Subject: Favorable HB1181
To: House Ways and Means Committee
From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland
Contact: James Garret Mooney, President
Maryland Organization of Parents of Blind Children
1123 North Eutaw Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
Phone: 480-433-8003
Email: james.garret.mooney@gmail.com
Date: March 3, 2021

Public education has promised to provide a free and appropriate education and access to all materials for all children. We need accountability so the promises and commitments made to our children are kept.

In August 2020, the Maryland Parents of Blind Children organization (MDPOBC), which is part of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, wanted to make sure schools across the state would fulfill the promises and commitments made to our blind children as schools moved to virtual instruction necessitated by COVID-19. We sent a letter to all local school districts and State Superintendent Karen B. Salmon, asking how schools would offer services unique to blind students, such as Braille instruction, orientation, and mobility; how they would ensure all instructional materials would be accessible to blind and low vision students; and how evaluations and assessments of blind students would be carried out.

Out of the 24 districts in the state, only ten responded. Some of the responses attempted to answer our questions, but most either referred us back to the letter sent by State Superintendent Salmon or did not answer our questions directly. The districts who answered our question in regards to accessible instructional materials informed us that adaptive technology used by the blind, such as screen readers and Braille displays, had been deployed and were available to students. Screen readers and Braille displays help the student read the computer screen, but they do not work when the computer programs being read are not accessible. The creators of technology-based instructional programs - such as Google Classroom, Seesaw, Schoology, and

many others - must incorporate accessibility in the program's design. It is the responsibility of local school systems to not purchase or use these programs if they are inaccessible.

The purchasing of accessible instructional materials has been a failed promise for years and is not a new problem created by COVID-19. Kelly and her son Tyler, who are both members of MDPOBC have been fighting their district for years on the inaccessible cromebooks used by the district. Kelly has been asking her district for years to provide Tyler a Windows laptop because the cromebook given to him by the district is not accessible with screen readers. Rather than continue to fight the district and allow himself to fall behind in his now virtual class, Tyler used his own birthday and Christmas money and bought his own laptop at the beginning of this year.

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the problem of the district failing to commit to our blind children. As a father to a blind kindergartener, I have seen the lack of commitment firsthand. My daughter has been unable to use the various instructional tools to help reinforce knowledge obtained during an already shortened school day because the learning platform used is inaccessible. Consequently, my fiancé and I have had to create unique lessons to help reinforce what her teacher has taught. We even had to acquire a reader to help administer her assessments because of the inaccessibility of the district's learning platform.

Delegates, I ask that you please pass HB1181. We have to ensure that our promises and commitments to our children are fulfilled. Incorporating accessibility into technology is not difficult and is more cost effective to incorporate at the initial planning stages than to do so retroactively. In 2021, we have access to more technology than ever before and we possess the ability to give access to every single person. Now all we need to do is fulfill our promises and commitments, and hold vendors and school systems accountable.