

Hello my name is Iris Zhan, I use she/they pronouns, I'm 17 and a junior from River Hill High School in Howard County, Maryland, and I am here to testify in favor of HB 753. I want to start off by talking about my own experience of why this is important and personal to me.

In eighth grade, I organized a walkout at Clarksville Middle School on the 20th anniversary of the Columbine shooting to protest against gun violence.

In tenth grade, I organized a climate strike at River Hill High School on September 20, 2019 and organized other students in Howard County to lead climate strikes at many other high schools, as part of the largest global climate strike in history with 4 million people across the world participating in a historic day.

Mass mobilizations like these have the power to bring urgent attention to the most pressing issues in our society and get more people involved in making a difference. As someone who has organized demonstrations on school grounds and outside of school grounds, I can personally say that this bill is of extreme urgency in order to protect student's crucial rights to peacefully demonstrate. In the process of organizing these protests I faced many difficulties of getting them approved by administration and getting people to come because we weren't allowed to advertise it within school, and this needs to change.

Students should not be discouraged from organizing demonstrations because of fear of punishment from the school, because that is hypocritical to what our schools teach us. I am fortunate that my school excused the short absences from class for the protests. I want every student in Maryland to be afforded this privilege that should be a right. To hinder students our ability to protest is censoring the will of the students. Many would say that students should do it outside of school, but school is like our second home. It is the place where we learn about the world and use our knowledge to make this world better.

In school we learn about the importance of our bill of rights, especially our first amendment rights. We are taught to be proud of this country because we have the freedom to express ourselves, petition the government, and assemble. While our country is far from perfect, these fundamental rights have helped our country become better because throughout history young people have organized and fought against injustices and for more justice in this world. In school we learn about all these social justice movements, many of which have been led by young people. We learned about the Little Rock Nine, and the Tinker vs Des Moines court case and many more.

Adults always say that the youth are our future, which is true. But we are also the present and the now. When Greta Thunberg started school striking for climate, adults told her to go back to school and get an education. But this is education, activism is education. If we are going to be fed all this knowledge every day, we have the right to apply that knowledge beyond the classroom to create a vision of the world we seek. In order for students to become the independent leaders of today and tomorrow we need you to please support this bill. Thank you.

