

Testimony of Catherine Carter
Supporting HB1170: Virtual Schools
Ways and Means Committee
Wednesday, March 3, 2021

My name is Catherine Carter. I live in District 9 and writing in support of HB1170: Virtual Schools. I am a vision advocate who works to support the behavioral health of our students and stay-at-mom of five. My oldest Atticus is Howard's Virtual School, and I am homeschooling four of my children with online programs that I assign as their virtual teacher. This bill will help ensure that schools can offer students who struggle with in-school but thrive in a virtual environment equal access to an educational environment that works best for them.

Many Students are Thriving in Virtual School

Every student is different. I have five kids, and four of them really struggled with Howard County's version of virtual school. However, my tenth grader Atticus loves the virtual school and is excelling. He is easily able to find and do his assignments. I can easily just use the parent app to see assignments and take his Xbox time if there are missing assignments. He has learned to become an independent learner and doing better than the traditional school. Also since his college is part in person and part online program, virtual school has been preparing him.

Home and Hospital

I wish that virtual school had been an option when Atticus was in Home and Hospital. In his sixth-grade year, Atticus was diagnosed with double vision. At the beginning of the year, an IEP team said the double vision was not a visual impairment and refused to add any vision accommodations to his IEP. Throughout that year he struggled with blurry visions, headaches, nausea, and dizziness that got progressively worse as his visual stamina decreased. After developing vertigo, not being able to read beyond fifteen minutes, unable to do his and no accommodations, I put Atticus in Home and Hospital. Students typically receive six instructional hours a week on full-time Home and Hospital. We also had to purchase audio books and computers with our own money to provide Atticus with his needed vision accommodations through digital technology. Even though Atticus was recovering physically, he was losing significant instruction time with just six hours of instruction.

Home and Hospital is exceedingly difficult for working parents, especially since it requires an adult supervision. I had a friend whose daughter could not return to school due to TBI, visual, and behavioral health issues. She was a working parent who for years had to use family and friends to provide adult supervision or transport her daughter to the library. It was a real struggle for that family and greatly impacted the daughter's academics. She is going to online college and thriving; however, she lost a lot of learning. A virtual school option would have made a significant difference in this student's life.

Alternative School

Many students who are sent to alternative schools must travel for hours on a bus. In Western Howard I see friends of my son being picked earlier in the morning and dropped off late, taking up their whole day. If student had the option to do virtual school and thrived, then instead of wasting time on travel, these kids who are already struggling can spend more time learning, playing, participating in extra curriculars, and just being a kid.

Better Digital Accessibility for Disabilities

Three of my kids needed digital accommodations that online learning provides. Virtual school means all the documents are online, allowing visual accessibility through text to speech, dictation, enlarged text, spacing, blue light filters. Atticus, through his high school's virtual school can easily dictate text on documents. My eighth grader uses the text to speech all the time. She struggles with focusing while reading and writing. Having the text read aloud, typing her answers, and having the computer read back to her has been a game changer. She figured out what works best for her. My fourth-grader needs white spacing in Math, an IEP accommodation that was the most difficult for his teachers to accommodate. We use Aleks which is online Artificial Intelligence math program use from 3rd to graduate school that shows one problem at a time. Virtual School can help kids who lack accessibility in the traditional school format with paper and verbal, visual instruction, by having the technology and everything digital.

Online education allows students to study and learn at their own pace. They decide when they are competent in a topic and when they can move on to the next topic. If lessons are recorded, they can replay needed sections as needed. This is critical for students with disabilities or other hindrances. They can more easily adapt their education to their learning needs. Online materials can come with accessible resources such as audio readings and visual descriptions. These materials are easily manipulated in ways that printed materials cannot be: larger font, different fonts, zoom ability, and adjustments in text and background contrast.

Online materials can make use of adaptive learning, creating a learning experience that is unique to each student. Software can identify areas where the student needs extra practice or areas where they are already competent. This helps accelerate student learning, especially because they are not held back by a teacher or the rest of the class. The student is in more control of their learning.

Better Assess to Courses

Not all schools or school districts offer equal opportunity to courses. My high school in Pennsylvania had a biology class with cameras that would allow students in other school districts access to classes their school could not offer. Many schools cannot find the teachers, especially in math, science, and technology, and virtual has helped fill that gap. Now my school is offering virtual school to students who want courses they would not have access to otherwise.

Expertise in Virtual School

It takes expertise to develop an effective virtual school model. I was really frustrated with the format of virtual school. Some teachers clearly had the technical expertise to develop an effective online curriculum, many of these teachers had their assignments online even before COVID-19. However, some teachers were really struggling and their strength was in in-school instruction. It felt like the school was not creating a virtual school but trying to do regular school virtually, and it was not working.

We shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater on virtual school. I have seen all my kids benefiting from virtual school. Teachers were asked to build the plane while flying. An effective virtual school requires specialist, engineers, testing, and years of usage to make sure the plane flies right. I ask for a favorable vote because a lot of kids are thriving in virtual school and should be given this option to help address the gaps in our current school models such as home and hospital, disabilities, and better equality in student access to courses.