



February 3, 2021

House Ways and Means Committee

HB 624: Prince George's County – Board of Education and Chief Executive Officer
– Revisions PG 502-21

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Kaiser, Vice-Chair Washington, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Our Revolution Prince George's, I am writing to express our strong support for HB 624 - PG502-21.

HB 624 will repeal the 2013 legislation HB 1107. It will return a fully elected school board to Prince George's voters and return the authority to select the school superintendent to the school board. The passage of HB 1107 was a black mark on the Prince George's delegation and on the General Assembly. Only in a majority-minority county would voting rights and oversight held by the people be removed in this underhanded fashion.

We urge you to look at the versions of HB 1107 as it evolved during the 2013 General Assembly session. The bill titled "*Task Force on the Membership and Operation of the Prince George's County Board of Education*" began with the intent of establishing a task force to study the structure of the Prince George's school board and to make recommendations for change. The task force bill was (in our opinion) improved by amendments from your colleagues and predecessors on this committee and was approved by the House by a vote of 135-1 on March 21st. The bill then crossed over to the Senate where a hearing was held on March 26th.

Between March 26th and April 4th, the bill was completely gutted and re-written in the Senate; the only piece that remained in the original bill was its number. The task force morphed into a hybrid school board structure – part elected, part appointed – and the authority to select the school superintendent – now called the CEO - and the chair and the vice-chair of the board was given to the county executive.

This move was facilitated by the members of the Prince George's Senate delegation in collaboration with the County Executive and the gutting and rewording of the bill was approved by the Senate in a 39-7 floor vote. It is to the credit of the House that 47 members of your body recognized the problem when this fully altered bill was returned from the Senate, and voted against it on the floor.

Delegation bills are supposed to begin with a public hearing. In the case of HB 1107, Prince George's voters were denied this opportunity; the bill they testified on at the public hearing was not the bill that was passed by the General Assembly.

It was publicly stated by then County Executive Baker, that the change to the school board structure would address low student achievement, but board structure has repeatedly been shown to have no impact on student learning. Instead, the hiring of County Executive Baker's hand-picked CEO, Dr. Maxwell and the weakened oversight by the school board only exacerbated the governance problems in the school system. This spilled out publicly in 2017-2018. Likely driven by the pressure to show improvements in school achievement rates, a State audit in 2018 showed that student grades had been altered and graduation requirements had not been enforced. The ranks of top level administrative staff had bloated and salaries boosted by as much as 30 percent over two years.

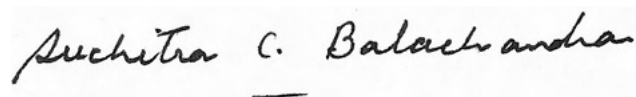
During her 2018 campaign, current County Executive Angela Alsobrooks called for the resignation of Dr. Maxwell – which was heeded – and supported a return to a fully elected board.

Long time education advocate and stalwart, Dr. Alvin Thornton, recently resigned as the appointed chair of the Prince George's school board after a two-year stint saying that the hybrid system sows discord within the school board and makes it difficult for the board to function smoothly.

Education is a shared state-county responsibility in Maryland and there is an intentional firewall between the county government and the school system. We ask for that firewall to be restored. Surely if the voters of Prince George's county are capable of electing their delegates and senators, and their county executive and county council, they are capable enough of electing school board members who can oversee our school system.

HB 624 will do just that. We ask for a favorable vote.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Suchitra C. Balachandran". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a short horizontal line.

Suchitra Balachandran
Our Revolution Prince George's
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