

Testimony on SB 617, February 16, 2022
Jonathan Lazar, Ph.D., LL.M.
Professor of Information Studies, University of Maryland

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I am here today to state my support for SB 617, because SB 617 would ensure that students with disabilities are not faced with discrimination from inaccessible digital technologies and content, while at the same time reducing costs for county Boards of Education.

In the recent past, county Boards of Education in Maryland have frequently procured digital technologies and content that are inaccessible for students with disabilities. This has led to 1) increased costs for the counties as those digital technologies and content must then be remediated, 2) students with disabilities having unequal access to digital technologies and content until the remediations are made.

Simply put, it does not make sense to acquire inaccessible technologies and then spend extra time and money to make these technologies accessible for students with disabilities, when there are suitable, accessible alternatives available. The vendors, not the county Boards of Education, should be responsible for ensuring accessible technologies and content, not putting the responsibility on the county Boards of Education. I teach university courses on how to design technologies to be accessible, and when designed from the start with accessibility in mind, there is no additional cost to design technologies in an accessible manner. The costs are only incurred when a technology is designed as inaccessible, and then must be remediated ⁽¹⁾.

SB 617 is both a cost savings bill, and a civil rights bill. Maryland has laws already in place, requiring accessibility for technologies developed or procured by the state government⁽²⁾, and SB 617 would expand the use of those best practices in accessible technology procurement, to county Boards of Education. As a professor of information studies, I want county Boards of Education to copy the existing best practices used for procurement in state and federal government, which can 1) save money and 2) ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to technology. The core approaches proposed in SB 617 (requiring accessibility details in procurement contracts and requiring indemnification by vendors) are best practices for improving accessibility through procurement ⁽³⁾. When a county Board of Education acquires digital technology or content and later determines that it is inaccessible, it often requires extra expenses to remediate the technology, as well as a time delay in access for students with disabilities. But, the Board of Education should have never procured the technology in the first place, if the technology was not accessible. By having formal processes in place, the cost, risk, and responsibility are transferred to the vendor, rather than the county Boards of Education.

There are many existing resources for accessible procurement. Because procurement is a very effective method for ensuring accessible technology, there are many existing resources to help with the process. At the Federal level, the General Services Administration provides resources to support the accessibility of technology in procurement ⁽⁴⁾. A partnership of industry and government created the Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT, referred to in SB 617), to help vendors provide clear details about the accessibility features of their information technology products ⁽⁵⁾. The National Association of State CIOs (NASCIO) has clear guidance on including IT accessibility in procurement processes ⁽⁶⁾.

I enthusiastically support SB 617 because it helps remove barriers for students with disabilities, while at the same time reducing costs, by utilizing existing best practices in procurement of digital technologies and content.

References

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Dr. Jonathan Lazar is a Professor in the College of Information Studies (iSchool) at the University of Maryland. At the University of Maryland, Dr. Lazar is the director of the Trace Research and Development Center, the nation's oldest research center on technology and disability, and is a faculty member in the Human-Computer Interaction Lab. Dr. Lazar joined the iSchool in 2019, after 19 years as a Professor of Computer and Information Sciences at Towson University, where he served as director of the information systems

program for 14 years. Dr. Lazar has authored or edited 14 books, including Research Methods in Human-Computer Interaction (2nd edition, co-authored with Heidi Feng and Harry Hochheiser), Ensuring Digital Accessibility Through Process and Policy (co-authored with Dan Goldstein and Anne Taylor), and Disability, Human Rights, and Information Technology (co-edited with Michael Stein). He has published over 150 refereed articles in journals, conference proceedings, and edited books, and has been granted two US patents for his work on accessible web-based security features for blind users. He frequently serves as an adviser to government agencies and regularly provides testimony at federal and state levels, and multiple US federal regulations cite his research publications. Dr. Lazar has recently been honored with the 2020 ACM SIGACCESS Award for Outstanding Contributions to Computing and Accessibility, the 2017 University System of Maryland Board of Regents Award for Excellence in Research, and the 2016 ACM SIGCHI Social Impact Award, given annually to an individual who has promoted the application of human-computer interaction research to pressing societal needs. The opinions expressed in this testimony are the opinions of Dr. Lazar and do not represent the University of Maryland or the University System of Maryland.

Dr. Lazar can be reached by e-mail at jlazar@umd.edu.