
TESTIMONY PACKET: (B)

SENATE BILL 116

TESTIMONY FROM: MSC Senior Associate Group



MARYLAND STUDENT COALITION

2022 Legislative Session

marylandstudents.org

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Chikamara Obioha, District 12, chikamaraobioha@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition*
(marylandstudents.org)

January, 2022

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today I am writing to you in favor of SB116. SB116-Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts is a bill that was created to uplift minority voices and underrepresented groups in our English curriculum.

The state requires a more diverse English Language Arts curriculum because it is imperative we are part of the solution and not the problem. For so long and to this day minorities and underrepresented groups are not fully learned about it in schools adding to the prolonged misconceptions and rude actions towards these groups. It is important that students are exposed to different demographics lifestyles and understandings through a system of diversified curricula at a young age so they don't develop bad habits that cause them to then be discriminatory towards these groups. In schools, we are forced to read books that don't represent the makeup of the classroom, or even of the community.

In many communities throughout Maryland, there is a sufficient non-white, LGBTQ-based community that children are not exposed to through the books currently required by the curriculum. By creating a

a more diverse English Language Arts curriculum, as a state, Maryland would be helping to combat the prolonged issue of misconceptions and prejudice towards underrepresented groups.

As a current student in Maryland, I had, unfortunately, had little to no experience reading literature from a point of view other than a white male author. Being able to experience diverse literature was not something I was afforded in middle or elementary school. My first and only time reading a novel that wasn't from the point of view of a white male cisgender author was last year in the 9th grade English language arts curriculum where we had the opportunity to read the novel 'Long Way Down' by Jason

Reynolds. That was the only time in my entire education where we were able to learn about the life of a young black male and the hardships he went through. Being able to read novels that are from diverse authors shouldn't be something that happens once every 9 years in the curriculum but instead every single school year.

For the reasons I stated above, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Olivia Le, Legislative District 5, olliethomsonle@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition*
(marylandstudents.org)

Friday, January 14, 2022

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

Young people form their viewpoints based on the perspectives that flood their environment at an early age. Some young people are raised by and educated by uninformed perspectives, ones they don't have the resources to dispute until they are deeply ingrained. But the state legislature has a unique opportunity, right here, right now, to contribute at least one perspective that matters: that people of every demographic and every background have meaning, and have value; that every voice deserves to be heard. Studies show that young people who are exposed to diverse perspectives at an early age, through books, use more empathy when making decisions. By diversifying the perspectives that young people experience and therefore empathize with, through reading, the state legislature can make a difference by diversifying the perspectives young people internalize at an early age, and carry into adulthood. Being informed about the effects of their actions on other people from their first-person perspective will be the reason young people actively rethink behaviors and viewpoints that they've unconsciously adopted, break the cycle of generational lack of education, and learn critical thinking skills at a young age that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. Diversifying the kinds of perspectives that young people internalize at an early age can raise more empathetic employers, policymakers and educators.

Young, young people do not have the critical thinking skills to differentiate "good views" from "bad views". They do not have the tools to understand racism, discrimination, inequality. They know only what is explicitly revealed to them by those they trust, and right now that reality is this: The perspective of the world, on average, is precisely as is reflected in the books specifically picked out and shown to them.

They know only that the peak of literature, the golden standard for first-person perspective, is through the blue eyes of the ancient literary canon. Young people of color view the world as the environment surrounding them illustrates it to them, including harmful beliefs about their own value and importance, and the myth of “inferiority”. Young people must be exposed to authority figures in their lives specifically pointing out for them perspectives that reflect their own, struggles that affirm their own experiences with inequality, relationships that are like to their lives, because without these young people are at a loss as to whether or not they exist. When the authority figures in the lives of young people do not specifically expose them to diverse perspectives that mirror their own, young, young people simply believe that is how the world is. According to just world fallacy, young people prefer, at large, to believe, the world is fair and people are generally good and well-intentioned, and, therefore, that their perspectives are omitted, simply put, because their experiences are inferior, and therefore less valuable and less worthy of inclusion in the literary canon. Less important and less noteworthy, less significant as points-of-view. And, by extension, view themselves as inferior voices and characters. Young people of color are made to believe that their voices matter less than those in the books shown to them. Who always seem to share the same characteristics of ancient status, experiences, and points of view. Regardless of whether or not it is ideal, the States is an increasingly diverse society, necessitating interpersonal knowledge to interact with members of every creed and identity, the people who will liaison, go to school, and work alongside today’s students, tomorrow’s adults, in order to succeed. Young people will need the resources to interact with cultures and religions with which they are unfamiliar, and the ability to experience diverse perspectives & viewpoints through reading sets them up for success. The state legislature has a unique opportunity at this moment to greet progress at the door, welcome it in, and offer it a neighborly hand.

For the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Julia Littlefield, *District 9B, juliacl207@gmail.com*
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition (marylandstudents.org)*

Friday, 1, 2022

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

As a senior in high school, the Maryland public school system has molded me for the past 12 years. I attend Centennial High School in Howard County. At Centennial, our biggest strength is our diversity. Our diversity is what draws people to our school and what we boast on our banners. In my classes, I am surrounded by peers of different races, sexual orientations, religions, socio-economic class, and gender identities. The books in our curriculum, however, do not reflect our population. As a white, cisgender student, I have always identified with the characters we discuss in class. I cannot speak for my peers, but I can only imagine the feelings of alienation, isolation, and lack of belonging that come from a repeated lack of representation. If our school system significantly benefits from diversity, why are we not expressing or embracing it in the classroom?

I choose to believe that for the vast majority of students, racism and discrimination comes from ignorance, not true hatred. In order to limit microaggressions and offensive language, students need to understand why what they're saying is wrong. Books are a powerful tool: they are able to transport students into a new perspective. For example, put into the shoes of a transgender teenager, students may better understand the concept of gender identity and why we introduce ourselves with pronouns at the beginning of the year. That is why it is crucial that Maryland diversifies the curriculum. The educational system has the opportunity to take a proactive step in making every student feel included and welcomed, and we need to seize it.

In 2019, at Glenelg High School, four students vandalized the school with horrific racial slurs and antisemitic symbols. This occurred just ten minutes from my school, and made the national news, yet was not mentioned in any of my classes. Moreover, whenever I bring it up with friends and peers it is typically the first time they're hearing of it. For me, this emphasizes the ignorance being perpetuated in our current system. We have a long way to go in addressing the prevailing racism, homophobia, and ignorance in society, and diversifying the curriculum is a great first step.

For the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Neha Dinesh, ne.dinesh2004@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition
(marylandstudents.org)*

SB116: Favorable

For years, in English class, we've read the classics. Romeo and Juliet, The Great Gatsby, Lord of the Flies, you name it. While I've enjoyed reading classics, I've gained so much more insight from reading books like In the Time of the Butterflies and poems like Substance, Shadow, and Spirit--works with diverse perspectives outside of the eurocentric norms of typical high school literature. Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee: today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

Literature in English class serves a couple purposes. First and foremost, we learn about literature analysis and things like structure, vocabulary, and rhetorical techniques. These lessons can be derived from many different pieces of literature, not just the classics. With analysis comes learning about the historical and modern context of the piece. For example, as my Humanities class read Jane Eyre this year, we compared the 1800s view of feminism with the modern take on feminism and how that was reflected in the ways that we perceived the book. Literature is crucial for teaching students about history, culture, and social norms--to a degree, the books we read in school shape how we view our world. By diversifying our English curriculum, we would be broadening the lens with which students view our world and spark conversations in the classroom that allow students to be aware of the diverse views and experiences of people in the world around them.

I myself have had the fortunate experience of taking Humanities, the only interdisciplinary course offered in Howard County. Through reading pieces from different cultures, religions, by authors with different backgrounds and from different time periods, I've been able to develop my critical thinking skills and make more connections in my own education. Not to mention, the diversity in our curriculum has made English a thoroughly interesting subject for me. These are a few of the reasons I chose to write SB116

with the MSC this year--I hope to expand these opportunities to students across the state. Thus, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Noah Hanssen, District 9B, noahkahanssen@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition
(marylandstudents.org)*

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB116.

The state of Maryland has a unique opportunity with the passing of this bill to engage in English education in a productive and effective manner to better prepare our students for life in an increasingly diverse state and country. There is a significant imbalance in the literature and focus of our current English Language Arts, one that disadvantages students whose curriculums remain overwhelmingly based on a similar set of experiences and perspectives against students whose teachers take the initiative in introducing diverse literature, though there are no curriculum guidelines around doing so. Creating an environment where students are more able to access and be taught significant literature from a diverse range of perspectives and experiences better equips them to engage with a diverse range of people, cultures and experiences, and to lose this educational opportunity in the classroom hamstrings those students compared to those who do.

I had the fortune to participate in the Humanities program at Centennial High School, which linked my English literature courses with my History courses, and included supplementary theater and art classes. So when in AP US History, while learning about the Civil War era and reconstruction, we covered literature like Huckleberry Finn and Their Eyes Were Watching God. While learning about African Colonialism in AP World History, we were reading Chinua Achebe and Rudyard Kipling. I credit this style of learning, and the diverse, unified method of teaching material, with my academic success in College.

My support for this bill is informed by my own academic success, and the success of my peers, having gone through an education style that this bill further incentivises. I strongly urge this bill to be read favorably and passed, understanding that there are advantages in learning based on diverse literature.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Maja Durkovic, District 7, maja729@hotmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition
(marylandstudents.org)*

Friday, January 14th, 2022

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

I have been fortunate enough to co-author the legislative brief for SB116, a role taken on by myself and the other dedicated Senior Associates of the Maryland Student Coalition (MSC). SB116 is a bill by the students, for the students, directly responding to the interests of Maryland youth in adjusting their curriculum. In the context of widespread acts of racial injustice throughout the United States, there is no longer time to wait on advocating for inclusive curriculums for all Maryland public schools. Maryland, in all its wonderful diversity, must act on representing and appreciating this diversity in our schools' curriculums.

Currently, there is no Maryland State standard that regulates the identities of authors of English Language Arts reading material, an issue that spurred the beginnings of discussion from the MSC and concerned student advocates. With the increasing number of students who belong to one or multiple minority identities, it is of the utmost importance for these students to see their identities reflected in the materials they are learning from. Other states have already taken on codifying diverse curriculums in state law; notably, the state legislatures of Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, and New Jersey have worked to pass curriculum regulations that are inclusive of gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, mental and physical disabilities, and religious tolerance, just as the proposed SB116 would accomplish.

As a cisgender, heterosexual white woman, there has always been a plethora of both characters and authors that represented me in my required school readings. A notable example, the most commonly

required and read book focusing on racial injustice in high schools, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, is both written by and focused on a white woman. Upon my joining the MSC, diverse curriculums were an issue I hoped to work to advance further. Hearing student testimony in the MSC, many from students who had never felt represented in their classrooms, made this issue far more personal to me. In Maryland's diverse classrooms, there is a clear problem with the current curriculum if only those who fit in a certain identity, like myself, feel appropriately represented. My work with the Baltimore County Diversity and Equity Committee has driven this issue home on the countywide level as well. Amazingly, SB116 has the leverage to create equality across all counties in Maryland.

Our state is one of great diversity. Our students must feel comfortable in their classrooms and be able to connect with the content that they are learning. SB116 has the power to change curriculum and our current education issues with inclusivity for the better, across all counties in Maryland, for almost 900,000 students. It is your duty as legislators to make this bill law and advocate for those young Marylanders who do not fit the identity expected from our current Eurocentric education standards.

For the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a **favorable** report on SB 116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Kyle Abosch, 35A kyle.abosch@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition
(marylandstudents.org)*

Friday, January 14th, 2022

SB116: Favorable

Throughout the history of the education system, inclusion for all students has been a major issue. Since America has come off a past full of anger towards those who do not conform to or match the ideal image of those in society, it makes many students lack the representation they require from a positive environment. This makes positive and impactful change necessary, making SB 116 all the more important. Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

I believe that the state requires a more diverse ELA curriculum because it would allow a larger amount of students to receive representation in their educational pursuits. Without the changes to the curriculum, it shows that the Maryland Education System is not open to those different from the majority of society (i.e., White Cis Male).

Although I have been represented in the literature I consume, it is because I am conforming to the image of our ancient society. However, a majority of my friends are unable to share my ability to connect with the characters and authors from the novels we are required to read throughout the ELA curriculum.

I believe that all students, regardless of gender, race, and sexuality, require proper representation in the literature they consume as it allows them to feel welcome to our modern society. For the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Siddharth Shah, 9A, shahsidd2004@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition
(marylandstudents.org)*

14 January, 2022

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

To come at this bill and why it is necessary to be implemented within our state from a practical and reasonable point of view, the first point I will try to establish is that diversity within our curriculum is a necessity when aiming to create a more inclusive and comfortable learning environment for all students.

This bill is a unique opportunity to invest in students across the State, and invest in an educational system that strives to make all students feel comfortable and represented within their learning environment.

ELA curriculums in my county, within the State, and overall across the country are widely known to not include much diversity in authorial point of view. As a student within the Howard County Public School System since Pre-K to all the way now, as a senior in high school, I have a first hand understanding of the English curriculum system within my county and the state. Over the past 10 years of reading novels assigned by the ELA classes I have taken, I have read four books by female authors and two books by an author of color.

Female authors, and authors of color are consistently left out of curriculums, while students continue to read stories and books written consistently by the same demographic: white males. While there is absolutely nothing wrong in teaching the classics, there is something wrong with leaving key voices out of our English curriculum. Learning and reading about different perspectives, and being able to analyze and understand literature at a deeper level is the entire goal of an ELA course, however if the same

perspectives are repeated within our curricula year after year, how are students supposed to develop an introspective and deep understanding?

This bill in no way is unreasonable or unattainable, and proves to be the opposite. By giving teachers the opportunity to choose their own books and material to teach, while simply guiding them towards authors that provide a diverse perspective of society and literature, our curriculums will impact students for years to come, and will allow future students to have a more well rounded and diverse understanding of English.

I truly believe that my education would have been greatly supplemented if I read and analyzed more diverse literary perspectives within ELA at school. I hope this opportunity to make student's overall experience with ELA more positive and effective is supported by this assembly, and for the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 116.

TESTIMONY

BILL: Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts - Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Ngoc-han Elani Bui, District 39, lanibear0027@gmail.com
**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition
 (marylandstudents.org)*

SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116. I have been in the Montgomery County public school system since Kindergarten. That is 10 years of learning, 10 years of literature, and 10 years of noticing that my friends and I are not like the people in the books we read. We are the minority, a word thrown around to group people who don't have the same opinion, ideology, or skin color as the larger population. None of us are outrageously rich like the characters in the Great Gatsby or live in a completely caucasian community like in Macbeth. Our current struggles aren't related to traveling home after 20 years at war, nor rising to high society. Maryland needs a more diverse ELA curriculum in order to acknowledge the diversity of its students and foster a welcoming and inclusive environment. NYU has found that, "culturally responsive education decreases dropout rates and suspensions, and increases grade point averages, student participation, self-image, critical thinking skills and graduation rates." I, myself, am an avid reader of both classic and contemporary works. Since I was a child, I've grown accustomed to the weekly trips to the library and lugging a bag full of books back home. But unknowingly, the books I surrounded myself with were mainly Caucasian, straight, characters whose biggest problem was something simple, like losing their Best Friend. Their lives were nothing like the ones people around me led, struggling to make ends meet, dealing with loss, and oppression. Recently, I've read both Lord of the Flies and Things Fall Apart, two books published within four years of each other. Lord of the Flies is a story about British schoolboys left to fend for themselves on an island, while Things Fall Apart shares the impacts of colonization on their [Lower Nigerian tribes] culture. The former is taught in English classes all over America, while Things Fall Apart and other stories sharing unfavorable events are not. Why is it that only some stories are heard and only limited viewpoints are taught? Education is a tool to spread knowledge and awareness. Recognizing minority voices allows students to feel seen and to learn more about current issues and history's influence on them. For the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 116.