



TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HB 1152 Public Schools—Student Bill of Rights and Prohibitions on Suspensions and Expulsions

POSITION: Support

BY: Nancy Soreng – President

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The League of Women Voters of Maryland (LWVMD) **supports House Bill 1152**. LWVMD supports a comprehensive range of child-centered services to ensure all children have a chance to grow toward stable, productive adulthood. In addition, this bill is in line with the League of Women Voters' commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in principle and in practice.¹

HB 1152 establishes 10 rights designed to ensure students are welcomed, receive the support and services they need, are encouraged to participate fully regardless of background or differences, and are safe at school. Perhaps the most important of these rights is number 7, "the right to consistent and equitable discipline practices."

There is clear and consistent evidence of disparities in school discipline policies and practices particularly impact students from low-income and historically underserved populations.² Students of color and poor students are disciplined more often and more harshly than their peers for the same behaviors. They are also more likely to be disciplined for minor behaviors that are open to subjective interpretation or do not harm other students. For example, in the 2018-19 school year, nearly 40% of suspensions and expulsions in Maryland public schools were for disrespect, disruption, and attendance related offenses.³ As the Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison pipeline document reports, discipline disparities result from inconsistent adult responses to various behaviors, not to different conduct by students themselves.⁴

¹ League of Women Voters' Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policy. <https://www.lwv.org/about-us>

² Sunderman, G. L. & Croninger, R. (2018). *High suspending schools in Maryland: Where are they located and who attends them?* College Park, MD: Maryland Equity Project, The University of Maryland.

https://education.umd.edu/sites/education.umd.edu/files/MEP_High%20Suspending_Oct%202018.pdf

³ Maryland State Department of Education, "Maryland Public School Suspensions By School and Major Offense Category: In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions, 2018-2019." Available at <https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20182019Student/2019SuspensionsbySchoolCOMBINED.pdf>

⁴ Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices, Final Report and Collaborative Action Plan (December, 20, 2018), <https://www.law.umaryland.edu/media/SOL/pdfs/Programs/ADR/STPP%20%20RP%20Commission%20Final%20Report.pdf>

HB1152 addresses this issue of inconsistent disciplinary responses by defining “unsafe behavior” as “behavior that is dangerous to the health or safety of students or others.” It rightfully excludes from this definition disruptive and disrespectful behavior that is nonthreatening and does not harm another. This protects students from arbitrary and capricious removals from school and appropriately balances the principal’s ability to promote a safe environment for all students.

The LWVMD has a long-standing history of support for an equitable and accessible educational system. In that vein, public policy needs to move away from policies and practices that have a disparate impact on students and develop ways to support students. It also calls for developing standards for when students can be suspended or expelled from school. HB 1152 points us in that direction by establishing a student’s bill of rights, defining unsafe behaviors, and prohibiting suspensions and expulsions for behaviors that are not harmful to others and open to subjective interpretation.

The League urges the committee to give a favorable report to House Bill 1152.