

Testimony offered on behalf of:
AMY SPARKS

IN SUPPORT OF:
HB0848 – Public Charter Schools – Virtual Learning Programs

House Ways and Means Committee
Hearing: 3/3/2022 at 1:00 PM

My name is Amy Sparks. I am a resident of Rosedale, Maryland. I am here today to **SUPPORT HB0848 – Public Charter Schools – Virtual Learning Programs.**

About 18 years ago, I had to pull my two daughters out of the public-school system due to bullying issues. They had just finished the 5th grade. I home-schooled them for middle school. I was worried about my ability to teach them in high school but then, in 9th grade we were given the opportunity to participate in the Baltimore County Online Public-school pilot program. Even though the parents and students found success in the program, this program was canceled abruptly after one year, due to Maryland law seat requirement. Let me mention that families organized and pushed for laws to be changed. Which gave us the current Virtual school bill but still isn't what we needed. We were told, it's a slow process. My family couldn't wait. **We then made the decision not to return to traditional brick and mortar school but to continue in a private online school: Pearson Online Academy.**

This was the best educational experience for our daughters and family. For instance, my one daughter had ADHD and was behind in reading. Her teachers were able to add extra reading classes and by the next year she was back on grade level. As for my family, my husband worked a 2 pm to 11pm shift and virtual school allowed him to be active in their lives and education. My daughters thrived in this virtual schooling environment and went on to receive Senatorial scholarships. I am proud of my daughters' achievements. For example, one daughter now works for a hospital, and she helped design the new building's wireless network. This brings me great pride as I am a Breast cancer warrior and I receive my follow up care in that exact building.

As for my younger two children, we continued with Pearson Online Academy because it worked for us. I was concerned that he would be without some reading fundamentals, but we were able to enroll him in 1st grade math with other subjects at kindergarten level. When I was diagnosed with Breast cancer, my children were in about the 3rd and 5th grade. I discussed with one of my children's teachers that I might need to put them in an unknown brick and mortar school, not knowing what I would be able to handle. My son's teacher replied, "We've got you. Let us help you get through this." And they did. They ensured that my children stayed on track and gave us the needed support to continue online learning. I have never felt like just a number to them.

I am happy to announce that my son has now graduated. His entire educational experience has been virtual online school, with live support from his teachers at his fingertips. I remember when he was taking Calculus last year. He called me over and asked me for help. I looked at the screen and said, without hesitation, "Sure!" I took over his mouse and clicked the school's Live Tutor button, where a tutor was available to assist him. He is currently majoring in Cyber Security at CCBC and just made the Dean's list with a 3.87 GPA.

Which brings me to my baby girl. She is now in the 10th grade. While I have witnessed many schools thrown into what I would call “Crisis Online Learning Mode,” I am relieved to say that my daughter’s quality education has not missed a beat. She can do her classwork any time of the day or night. 6 pm happens to be the time of day when she is most productive. I share my story with you because, throughout these 18 years, I have repeatedly been contacted with parents to find out how they can get my virtual school option. Unfortunately, it is not available as a public school in this State, while it is available in 29 other States. Virginia just added 2 more virtual state schools. Maryland already uses 100s of vendor-provided individual classes. Why no full-time version? Maryland should allow a Charter School. It’s your job to look ahead, to prepare Maryland. Do families need to wait another 18 years? **VOTE TO APPROVE HB0848** Do not let this bill die in this Committee. Maryland families deserve to have HB0848 brought to the House floor for a vote.

Respectfully submitted.

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