

Testimony for HB489 - Commission on History, Culture, and Civics in Education

House Ways and Means Committee

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Prepared By: Ikenna Wosu

FAVORABLE

As an advocate with the Antiracism for Maryland Schools (ARMS) coalition, and a graduate student at the University of Maryland, School of Social Work, I strongly support House Bill 489. This bill seeks to establish a commission that examines the culture and history of the United States and Maryland, about the contributions of minority groups, the intersectionality of minority communities, and the persecution of religious minorities. This commission will recommend the Maryland State Board of Education on programs and curriculums on multicultural history, social studies, and civics in the United States and Maryland. As Maryland and our country continue to diversify, having inclusive curriculums are imperative for students to gain knowledge and perspectives of our multicultural history and experiences to promote understanding and respect among our diverse population.

Changing demographics

Over the past 20 years, the State of Maryland has become more diverse in its racial and ethnic populations. In 2000, the minority population was 36 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). In 2010, it rose to 40 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). As of 2020, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) represent 52 percent of Maryland's population, joining the ranks of states like New Mexico, California, Texas, and Nevada (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In addition to the overall racial demographic change, Maryland has also seen a significant increase in its immigrant population, with 9 percent of Maryland residents being immigrants in 2000, to an increase of 15 percent in 2019 (Migration Policy, n.d.). That is nearly 1 million foreign-born Americans living in the state of Maryland. These changes reflect the current demographic makeup of Maryland schools, with BIPOC students comprising more than 60 percent of the total student body (Robert McCord, 2020).

The changing demographics also bring a variety of cultures, religions, languages, and values to our state, making it a definitive multicultural region. It is imperative for government officials and the community at large to engage in a process that will explore and uncover significant historical events, cultural dynamics, and contemporary issues that make up the multicultural experience of our state and country.

Inclusiveness and belonging

Implementing an inclusive curriculum in public schools is imperative for BIPOC students to understand better their own identities in a society where they have traditionally been seen as "other." A student's cultural background plays a significant role in developing their identity (Altugan, 2015). Without an inclusive curriculum, BIPOC students are disadvantaged by not having the opportunity to fully understand their history and experiences, leading to the development of an unhealthy sense of self. An inclusive school climate can bolster the sense of belonging in the classroom and lead to better academic outcomes for BIPOC students. (Thurber et al., 2019).

As a lifelong Maryland resident, a child of Nigerian immigrants, and a former Black student from Maryland Public Schools, I remember how under-exposed I was to the history of Black people in the United States. Black history was not taught comprehensively or accurately. Not much was covered in my schools beyond the meager classwork on slavery, segregation and civil rights, and the Obama presidency. There were no opportunities to critically think through the nuances of these topics or how policy and practice — at all levels of government and in the private sector — impact the experiences and conditions seen today in Black communities. The curriculum also left out Black Americans' vast and rich contributions, including significant engineering and scientific discoveries and inventions, music and art, and overall academia. I also distinctly remember the lack of consideration for America's histories, cultures, and contributions of other ethnic and cultural groups. My experiences in school and the omission of multicultural education have affected how I view my people in the context of American society. When I began college, my knowledge of African American history was greatly expanded. However, I believe this kind of education must begin in the PreK-12 classrooms of public schools.

House Bill 489 does not force MSDE to adopt recommendations. Instead, it establishes a framework and a process for community members, government officials, and experts to research, discuss, and make recommendations that would expand upon the current curriculum for MSDE's consideration. During a time of extreme polarization among racial and ethnic groups in our country, the Maryland legislature has an opportunity to bring our diverse population together to have these critical discussions in a way that is transparent, healthy, and productive.

I strongly urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 489.

References

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