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March 24, 2020

Delegate Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Chair
Delegate Alonzo T. Washington, Vice Chair

House Ways & Means Committee
Room 131
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

SUBJECT: SB 617 – Equivalent and Nonvisual Access Accountability Act for K-12 Education

Chairman Atterbeary,

I am Lauren Bierman, Vice President of Public Affairs at Newsela, an instructional content platform serving over 3.3 million teachers and 40 million students across the country. I appreciate the opportunity to express Newsela's support Senate Bill 617 – Equivalent and Nonvisual Access Accountability Act for K-12 Education, as amended by the Senate. We are also glad that these issues were discussed in previous versions of the legislation in the 2021 Legislative Session. Maryland is one of a small but growing group of states to have considered these important issues. **We urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 617.**

As you may be aware, in recent years Illinois and New Jersey also considered and passed legislation to set out requirements for digital tools that school districts purchase for student use. These earlier states made the [World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG) standard the focus of their legislation and we are pleased that this standard is used in the Maryland legislation being considered today.

As we continue through the third year of pandemic-disrupted learning, it is clear that students are struggling. [Studies](#) reveal that by the end of this past school year, K-12 students were on average five months behind in math and four months behind in reading.

At the same time, students' relationships to learning technologies have been evolving, especially as educators turn to new strategies to address disruptions in learning. This turn toward technology has the potential to benefit student learning – using tech in the classroom keeps students engaged, makes it easier to collaborate, and imparts 21st century skills that make students college and career ready. However, as we make this transition, we must be careful to ensure technologies are accessible to everyone, especially the nearly 14 percent of K-12 learners who have disabilities that make some technology platforms difficult or impossible to use.

The proposed legislation before the committee today will ensure that almost all students are able to utilize and benefit from learning technology. Requiring online education tools

used in Maryland classrooms to comply with WCAG standards will ensure significant support for students with disabilities such as blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, and limited movement. This is a critical step toward increasing equity and accessibility in learning for all students, especially those who are often left behind.

While the realities of remote learning and increased reliance on technology are challenging in many ways, the awareness around accessibility in digital education tools is a welcome silver lining. Senate Bill 617, as amended, will lead to tangible, achievable, and easily implemented changes that can have a real impact on students.

As a company deeply committed to accessibility and delivering instructional materials that truly benefit every student, Newsela is proud to support this important legislation. Thank you for your consideration. Again, **we urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 617.**

Sincerely,

Lauren Bierman
Vice President of Public Affairs
Newsela

About WCAG Standard

WCAG stands for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, which applies to web content. From the [World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)](#) Web Accessibility Initiative:

*Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is developed through the [W3C process](#) in cooperation with individuals and organizations around the world, with a goal of providing a **single shared standard for web content accessibility** that meets the needs of individuals, organizations, and governments internationally, making web content more accessible to people with disabilities.*

[Web "content" generally refers to the information in a web page or web application, including](#):

- Natural information such as text, images, and sounds; and
- Code or markup that defines structure, presentation, etc.

About Newsela

Newsela takes authentic, real world content from trusted sources and makes it instruction ready for K-12 classrooms. Each text is published at five reading levels, so content is accessible to every learner.

Today, over 3.3 million teachers and 40 million students have registered with Newsela for content that's personalized to student interests, accessible to everyone, aligned to instructional standards, and attached to activities and reporting that hold teachers

accountable for instruction and students accountable for their work. With over 15,000 texts on our platform and 10 new texts published every day across 20+ genres, Newsela enables educators to go deep on any subject they choose.

Newsela is committed to maintaining a high level of accessibility and delivering instructional materials that truly benefit every student. In keeping with our mission, we are committed to making continuous improvements across Newsela in accordance with WCAG standards. Newsela meets WCAG AA standards, which allows more users to access our content.