

Testimony from Kelly Durkin, Baltimore City teacher
HB433 - Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners – Alterations

Before the House Ways and Means Committee

2/10/22

Position: FAVORABLE with amendments

Good afternoon members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Kelly Durkin and I am a Baltimore City teacher. This is my twelfth year with Baltimore City Public Schools. I support HB 433 to increase the amount of student members of the Baltimore City Schools Board of Commissioners from one to two, to give those student members full voting rights and the ability to participate in closed/executive sessions, to alter the process by which those students are chosen to be more democratic, and to establish a commission to research and make recommendations of board member compensation. I feel strongly that this bill will bring necessary changes to the structure of the school board and engagement of its commissioners with the stakeholders they represent.

On the district's webpage for the Board of School Commissioners, it lists seven strategic priorities. Priority IV states: "City Schools will effectively engage all stakeholders which include parents, families, and caregivers in their child's education and community partners who can contribute to the student's success." Well, ask any of these stakeholders, and I believe they will all tell you that such engagement is absolutely not happening.

On January 10 I wrote to every Baltimore City school board commissioner asking them to consider the negative impact of a policy enacted by Baltimore City Public Schools and advocate for a change. I did not receive a single response until January 20, and the only response I got was from Commissioner Richardson that my message would be passed on to the "appropriate staff". This is not my first time writing to them and receiving no response. I was further frustrated when I attended the school board meeting January 11 and noted that not only are school board commissioners meeting virtually—a safety not afforded the students and educators they supposedly serve—but only ONE commissioner had their camera on. I was appalled as none besides Commissioner Roberts had the decency to turn on their cameras while a student gave very eloquent testimony to these leaders. I cannot even imagine having my camera off while my students spoke to me on Zoom last year. Yet I should not have been surprised. These school board members are appointed, not elected, and they are unpaid. What incentive do they have to perform their duties well? To whom are they actually accountable? Baltimore City and Harford County are the only districts in the state of Maryland that do not offer any compensation for school board members, but at least Harford County's school board is partially elected.

Equally important to accountability is the question of access and representation. Serving on the Board of Commissioners is no small undertaking. It involves many hours of meetings each month, often during the workday. This therefore excludes many working people—especially hourly workers—and people with young children from the candidate pool. Yet these are the very people who SHOULD be serving on Baltimore City's Board of Commissioners as parents and working people make up the vast majority of the district. People should be fairly compensated for their time and the opportunity to serve should be accessible to all people, especially parents or guardians of City Schools students. This bill establishes a task force to study what compensation makes the most sense and to submit recommendations. To support HB 433, you do

not need to agree to compensate school board commissioners; you just need to agree that the premise should be explored.

I also support HB 433 because I believe the work we do as a school district is in service to students, and so I believe they deserve not one but two seats at the decision-making table with full voting rights. In my twelve years as an educator, my biggest complaint remains that educational policies are made by people who do not spend any time in classrooms. The Student Board Member is one of the only protections against this, yet currently they are not granted full voting rights. There is not a single School Board Commissioner who knows more about the challenges in schools and the concerns of stakeholders than the Student Board Member. Even so, student leaders tend to be from more affluent and better connected backgrounds. Expanding student representation to a second seat will make space for student leaders from more diverse backgrounds. Many leaders like to tout the remarkable intelligence and competence of our students, and I couldn't agree with such sentiments more. I am certain that high school students elected to the board are fully capable—and given their experience in the classroom, sometimes *more* capable—of making the decisions demanded of adult board members. They will of course have the support of other board members, and I think the board members would benefit from hearing student perspectives more often. If leaders truly believed in our students, they would seek to empower their voices not diminish them.

Finally, I support HB 433 because I think it is important to establish a more inclusive, democratic and transparent process for students to elect their own representatives, and to engage them in the democratic process as soon as middle school. Currently, the Associated Student Congress of Baltimore City holds an internal election during their summer retreat. The fee associated with membership in the ASCBC and the timing over the summer guarantees minimal input from the vast majority of students in Baltimore City. I hope that BCPSS will make changes to address low participation in the ASCBC, but that is by no means a substitute for a true election process in which every student in grades 6-12 can vote for a representative. As a member of the SGA at my middle school in Montgomery County, one of my most memorable responsibilities was running the election for our Student Member of the Board. It was so exciting to feel we had been given a voice in the decisions that impact us, and it was the beginning of my interest in the democratic process. This was twenty years ago that Montgomery County was involving all sixth through twelfth graders in the election process, and Baltimore City still has not caught up. Montgomery and Anne Arundel Counties also give their student members full voting rights. What better way is there to teach students about democracy and the importance of voting than to give them practice with a real election for their own representatives?

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to issue a favorable report on HB 433. I would be happy to answer any questions about my testimony via email or phone. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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