

## Testimony from Michele Joseph, CEO of Student Global Ambassador Leaders (SGAP Leaders)

I started the Student Global Ambassador Program ([SGAP Leaders](#)) when I realized there were fewer and fewer opportunities for BIOPOC, first generation, and young women to excel. I grew up near Takoma Park in a once upper middle class neighborhood in Wheaton, Maryland. My Trinidadian immigrant parents valued education and instilled in me that “education is the only way” to elevate the next generation. I have since learned that experiential education, coupled with social-emotional support, and applied skills provide needed scaffolding for our high school students to thrive - especially during the current post-pandemic era.

My mother taught at MCPS, and my son and I attended MCPS. The community that surrounded me as I attended school was not wealthy, but it provided critical vehicles in which I matriculated from college and later earned my graduate degree. I was one of the fortunate ones. Today, critical vehicles which afford opportunities to develop interpersonal, real-world problem solving, networking, communication and collaboration skills are rare. As a result, our teens are woefully prepared for the challenges at college and in their career. Today my neighborhood has more crime and more single- parent working families. Moreover, the local schools offer a narrower curriculum and fewer extra curricular activities. College has become unaffordable for many, and has limited return on investments for jobs or careers for recent graduates. Wheaton, where I live now, along with Takoma Park, reflect pockets of poverty in Montgomery county. Minimum wage jobs have multiplied and career pathways to the middle class have narrowed to a rocky, hard-to-navigate, uphill terrain. I started SGAP Leaders in 2016, and so far, we have impacted over 5,000 middle and high school students with our programming that is designed to engage, empower and inspire our students to enter STEM and Sustainability-related careers. All our programs have a service component. In addition, our graduates from our programs see themselves as leaders in climate action, civic engagement, environmental justice and more. We target underserved, and underrepresented teens who often reside in the pockets of poverty in Montgomery County. We hope to impact all teens in each county within the state. As such, HB 546 is a step in the right direction. We believe that it will provide the foundation to develop a sustainable mechanism for all teens to develop critical skills needed for life-long learning, and for them to positively impact their communities. We know the future for our students, communities and our state must be different. I am in support of HB 456 and wish to share the following points about the bill:

We appreciate H.R 546 for a number of reasons --it finally gives our youth --some would term disconnected youth--some resources to help them navigate a new employment landscape. It makes clear that the “Service Year Option Program ” is as much, if not more, about youth needing support for discovering and developing their career pathway, as it is about youth giving back to their communities. It recognizes that many students today need help and support to find their path; and, that path does not have to lead towards a four-year college degree which may be unaffordable for many families. It is also a timely initiative coming at the end of a global pandemic that delayed our students’ acquisition of critical skills needed for life-long learning, and in many cases, left them behind. What we offer are some pointers to help improve the bill.

- 1) Too modest in its ambitions--for a state run initiative that offers a year of service to all Maryland’s high school graduates. Growing the numbers of participants from 200, in its first year of operation (Due to begin July 1 2023), to 20,000 in its fourth year 2028 is quite frankly a drop in the bucket. **There are over 58,000 high school students who graduate high school each year. We should aim to reach--at least 20 percent of them with this legislation** --that translates to 3,000 for the first year building up to 30,000 by the eighth year of operation.

- 2) **Employers need a larger set of incentives to engage with the program.** The bill as written today favors only the largest of corporations that can afford to do the mentoring and specialized job guidance. BIPOC and women owned businesses tend to be small or mid sized, and would not be as able to participate in the program as the larger, and often, less diverse ones. Tax breaks or other incentives for the medium and small business (including non-profits) participation should be added to the mix. As a result, it would provide an opportunity for a broader and more diverse group of companies to participate.
- 3) Strengthen the regional offices that are contemplated in the legislation so they can help create localized career pathways including needed apprenticeship programs to assist young people who are eager to work for a green energy future. The [National Apprenticeship Week](#) survey found that **almost three-quarters of teens and young adults seek career paths** that would enable them to impact the environment positively, but there is - at present no (as far as we can discover) green energy career pathway that involves apprenticeship training in Maryland. This office will need to set up advisory panels to involve green energy companies and relevant unions to work with educational institutions to create curriculum and to enable a career pipeline to flow. Such advisory committees must include BIPOC, 1st generation, non profits and women to ensure that diversity efforts are maintained.
- 4) Everyone needs to have skin in the game. The funding for the bill needs to be supplemented by contributions from the companies that will benefit from the legislation--those in the green energy, health and education space that will benefit from having developed a new, vibrant and skilled workforce. Based on size and carbon footprint, they need to contribute to an educational fund that will enable the added support systems many in the BIPOC populations will need. These include summer youth employment programs, tutoring and customized mentoring programs as well as the design of apprenticeship programs and outreach efforts to schools and communities that typically are not reached in such statewide efforts.

So we stand ready to assist the committee in any way we can to move this much needed legislation forward and hope that we can, in a bipartisan fashion, move our state forward. We need this bill to become a model for the nation and with much work and energy, I feel confident we can accomplish this worthy goal.

***Michele Joseph***

Michele Joseph  
CEO, SGAP Leaders  
[mj@sgapleaders.org](mailto:mj@sgapleaders.org)  
862-242-0226