



6946 Dogwood Road Windsor Mill, MD 21244
443.809.2100 | www.watershedpcs.org

Dear Senator Guzzone and members of the Budget & Taxation Committee,

My name is Sage Magness-Hill, I use they/them pronouns, I live in west Baltimore County, and I serve as Board President of Watershed Public Charter School. I am writing to you today in support of Senate Bill 0646, and will share why its passage is important to my school community.

In addition to my work on the Watershed Board, I am also the parent of two Watershed first graders. Last year, when it came time to enroll in kindergarten, I lived in Rodgers Forge in North Baltimore, and was zoned for a school that was great academically, but had very little diversity in regards to race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. I had moved to Baltimore so that my children's lived experiences would be more diverse, so I looked at what other options I had in the way of public education in Baltimore County. There was only one other option besides my local elementary school: Watershed Public Charter School.

Watershed is currently the only charter school in Baltimore County, and emphasizes outdoor learning and arts integration. As an educator myself, I recognized something special about Watershed, that it was a school community that met all educational standards set forth nationally, state-wide, and county-wide, while approaching student learning differently than a traditional public school. Class sizes are small (22 students per class maximum) and students go outside for recess in rain, sun, or snow. Watershed also focuses on project-based learning, which encourages practical applications of subject matter across disciplines to culminate in a unit project. Since all charter schools in Maryland are public schools, there is no cost of attendance for families, and students are selected for seats based on a randomized lottery system held every February. Watershed is also diverse for a Baltimore County Public School, with a demographic breakdown of 51% Black/African American, 23% Caucasian, 14% Multiracial, 10% Hispanic, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. We have a 41% FARMS rate, and 13% of our students receive Special Education Services. With 283 students, our community is small and engaged. School attendance was 96% last year, which is remarkable considering our families come from 23 different zip codes and caregivers are solely responsible for transportation. Our families have also contributed over 2300 hours of volunteer service to Watershed this academic year. Our teachers and staff also love working at Watershed, and we saw a 98% retention rate last year (increasing steadily each year since our founding). While standardized testing isn't the only measure of student success, our students score above average for BCPS and outperform other local schools on MCAP. We have been honored to be a Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (MAEOE) Green School, and are a current Maryland Nominee for US Green Ribbon Schools. Each year, our lottery and enrollment for Watershed steadily increases, and we average about 4-6 applications for every open seat.

The reason I come to you today to ask for your support of SB0646 is that despite all Watershed's successes, we have faced some real challenges with our physical space and the maintenance of our facilities. As you have seen in the IAC Report, most charter school buildings are older buildings that the charter school leases from a landlord, and with that comes significant issues that our district counterparts do not face. Watershed currently rents our school building and land from St. Gabriel's Catholic Church and the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Our rent alone is \$18,000 a month, and while our lease agreement states that our landlord would be responsible for building and grounds maintenance and repairs, we have found that many repair costs still end up coming out of our operating budget. While on paper, our



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operating budget looks larger than other Baltimore County Public Schools, our budget pays out salaries, rent, and utilities, in addition to the rent and overall building maintenance. District schools are not responsible for these same facilities and operating costs, as the buildings are owned and maintained by the school district. We do receive a per-pupil amount for education funding, but unfortunately sometimes that funding has to be spent on the classroom instead of in the classroom.

I also want to highlight a challenge that has been unique to Watershed as a charter school in Maryland. To date, according to MAPCS, Watershed is the only charter school in the state that received **zero** ESSER dollars as a per pupil and zero facilities dollars from ESSER III for COVID safety improvements. When I inquired about this with BCPS recently, I was told that BCPS decided to centralize this crucial funding and only disseminated it to certain schools in an opaque decision-making process (email attached below). Watershed was never given an opportunity to apply for these funds, because we were under the impression that all public schools in the county would receive a per-pupil amount from ESSER for educational materials and COVID facilities improvements. Watershed had to pay for all facility improvements and additional required cleaning staff out of our operating budget and educational funds. I have attached the email from our BCPS liaison explaining why Watershed did not receive these funds. Because what little money we have for facility repairs was spent on these COVID requirements that ESSER should have covered, as well as ongoing maintenance of the school, we have faced significant facilities issues in our building. These issues have disrupted the instructional time our teachers and students need, and take money away from educational materials and learning opportunities. We want our PPA Blueprint Dollars to be spent IN the classroom, not ON the classrooms, physical repairs and facilities maintenance.

Should SB0646 pass, it would help charter schools like Watershed tremendously. It would ensure that our school community has the same facility experience as those in traditional schools with safe, secure, well-maintained physical spaces that enhance learning. With funding specifically earmarked for our facility, we can put all our educational funds towards actually educating our students. With what I have shared about all the great things Watershed is currently doing for our students, imagine how much more our school community could thrive if we had the same well-maintained facilities as all the other public schools in Baltimore County and in Maryland. Again, I strongly urge you to support SB0646, because all public school students deserve fair access to a healthy and safe learning environment.

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to share Watershed's story with you today. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at Board@Watershedpcs.org

With Maryland Pride,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sage Magness-Hill". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sage Magness-Hill
President, Board of Directors
Watershed Public Charter School



President Board <board@watershedpcs.org>

Scheduling a Check-in

Elmendorf, Douglas C. <delmendorf@bcps.org>

Fri, Mar 3, 2023 at 9:55 AM

To: "board@watershedpcs.org" <board@watershedpcs.org>, "jlehson@watershedpcs.org" <jlehson@watershedpcs.org>, "Kirk, Casey" <ckirk@bcps.org>

I just got off the phone with Whit. The short answer is that BCPS decided to make centralized decisions about the funding as opposed to doling out a certain amount or percentage to each school. As such, WPCS among many other individual schools were not identified as recipients of the funding for facilities purposes. Having said that, WPCS benefitted from ESSER in several other ways, as we discussed, including devices, additional 15 mins/day, bonuses for teachers, tutoring \$, and special education compensatory services, if applicable.

Hope this helps,

Douglas C. Elmendorf, Ed.D.

Executive Director, Department of Academic Programs and Options

Division of Curriculum and Instruction

Baltimore County Public Schools

443-809-3033



From: President Board <board@watershedpcs.org>

Sent: Thursday, March 2, 2023 3:13 PM

To: Elmendorf, Douglas C. <delmendorf@bcps.org>; jlehson@watershedpcs.org; Kirk, Casey <ckirk@bcps.org>

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