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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 0482

Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program - Mental Health Professionals in Public Schools

Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

February 22, 2023

2:00pm

The Baltimore Teachers Union supports Senate Bill 0482, which would expand the purpose of the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program to include assisting in the repayment of loans for mental health professionals serving as school psychologists, resource psychologists, psychologist coordinators, social workers, social worker supervisors, or mental health coordinators in the public schools; and requiring the Office of Student Financial Assistance to publicize the Program to eligible mental health professionals to help recruit and retain mental health professionals in the public schools.

The Baltimore Teachers Union represents 8,280 teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, clinicians, librarians, secretaries, community school site specialists, bus transportation aides, and many more school-based and central office support staff. We are 4 out of 5 workers in Baltimore City Public Schools, serving 75,595 students and their families. Our national union, the American Federation of Teachers, has over 1.7 million members in the United States and its territories.

The Baltimore Teachers Union currently represents 202 school social workers and 124 school psychologists. These clinical professionals provide a comprehensive continuum of services that support students both with and without identified disabilities. Since the forced closure of schools in March 2020, the school psychologists and social workers employed by Baltimore City Public Schools have worked tirelessly to ensure students and their families did not experience a disruption in support and services from school district-employed providers. School psychologists and social workers stepped up to adapt their service delivery to the virtual setting, adapting lessons and curricula to meet students' needs. They also provided practical support care through food deliveries and donation, furniture donations for families to help students create at-home learning spaces, and helping families secure childcare for parents who were essential workers, and housing assistance for students and families at risk of homelessness.

School psychologists and social workers never stopped working even when our school buildings closed, and while the thanks and gratitude expressed by the families and students they serve is

comforting, it does not help school psychologists and social workers lessen the emotional and financial stress they experience as a result of student loan debt. School social workers are required to have at minimum a masters degree to practice in schools. School psychologists have to complete at minimum two years of graduate training and a third year completing a full-time internship. In Baltimore City, several of our district-employed school psychologists hold a Doctoral degree.

Our school psychologists and social workers have spent years preparing for their careers in schools. And yet, the average school psychologist salary in Maryland is only \$88,610, while the average school social worker salary in Maryland is estimated around \$58,000. The financial reality for many school psychologists and social workers is one of hardship, tightening family budgets, and limited career growth opportunities. These factors make it difficult for school psychologists and social workers to provide for their basic needs, let alone pay down the large amount of debt many incur in receiving the training necessary to practice in schools.

School psychologists and social workers deserve to be included in the opportunity to apply for student loan debt relief through the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program, an opportunity that is already available to our colleagues. **It is for these reasons that the BTU supports Senate Bill 0482 and urges a favorable report.**