

## HB 737 – Right to Learn Act Testimony

Dear Committee,

As I introduce myself to you, I am certain you will recognize who I am. My name is Nichelle Watkins, the parent of two children who attend Johnston Square Elementary School - one of the twenty-three schools where it was recently revealed that zero students were performing at proficient levels in math. If you are familiar with the Fox45 News story, I am the young lady who was interviewed when the knowledge of the lack of proficiency was revealed. In this note to you today, I want to reiterate some of the information, points, and pleas that I made in that news story.

As I mentioned in the interview, I have been concerned that my son was not receiving an adequate education since my son was well into his first grade year. I am also concerned that with the lack of adequate resources, children in the Public School System will never receive a fair, quality education. Because I realized early on that he was not progressing as I know he should have been, I have made several requests that he be held back and not promoted to the next grade. Since the time he began first grade, I have also been requesting resources so that I can help my children even when they are not in class. While I do not send my children to school with the expectation that educators are babysitters for me to accomplish other things during the day, even as a single mother. I expect my children to go to school and learn the things they are supposed to learn. I have now been doing this for three years as, against my wishes and counsel, the school system continues to push my son through the system although he is clearly not prepared for the next higher grade. He is now in the fourth grade and I have been trying feverishly to be involved and provide counsel throughout the years that my son has been enrolled in the Baltimore City Public School System. I have been to his school so much that in October 2022 the principal barred me from visiting the school through March 2023. My cries have fallen on deaf ears for years. Nothing good can become of my children when they are not receiving an adequate education.

While it was unfortunate that it was required that I reach out to Fox45 News and Project Baltimore for resources for my son, who continues to struggle in this system, yet I have still not heard from the school he attends; the district; not the City about resources for him. Yet, as a result of my reaching out to Fox45 News, miraculously I have been able to acquire volunteers to help tutor and donations to cover the cost of extra curricular learning activities from complete strangers. It is no wonder crime rates are as high as they are in the city of Baltimore. As I mentioned in the interview, without an adequate education and with the strength of the streets in Baltimore, my son does not stand a chance of having the ability to survive in life. We are seeing the results of this outcome of this in the City of Baltimore and nationwide right now. Uneducated, young black boys and men with no jobs and no means of comprehending how to survive looking to the only other way to do so - robbing, stealing, and killing people for property/belongings that do not belong to them. They are doing it because it is all they know to do to survive. My son is a young black boy and his education to me, is a matter of life or death for him. I have watched my mother bury her son who was killed by a stray bullet, right here in this city. If it is up to me, I will not bury my son...at least not under these circumstances...not for him having a lack of fair and quality education. I am not saying that the failing school system is sole cause of the high crime rate in this city. It certainly is a symptoms of the ills of this city. However, there can be a light at the end of this tunnel.

While change might not be immediate, change must begin with education. For this reason, I am asking that you pass the bill that will allow me, a single mother who is extremely concerned about my children's education, to invest the resources allotted for the education of my children where I can rest assured they are receiving a great education. I promise I will not stop until there is attention placed on this matter, not only for my children but for every child enrolled in the Baltimore City Public School System. The children deserve a chance in life and currently, they are doomed before they even begin living their lives.

Regards,

Nichelle Watkins  
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