

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB637
Higher Education – Undocumented Students – Out of State Tuition Exemption
Eligibility

Committee: Education, Energy and the Environment

Date: February 26, 2024

Position: Support

Good afternoon,

My name is John Montgomery, and I am a middle school counselor in Reisterstown, Maryland and I strongly support House Bill SB637 Higher Education-Undocumented Students - Out of State Tuition Exemption Eligibility.

Before shifting to middle school, I was the ESOL Counselor for four years at a high school in Owings Mills, MD. During this time, I worked with new immigrants from throughout the world. During conversations with students about their post-secondary plans, we often navigated to a point where they may openly reveal their immigration status and thus their hesitancy towards attending a college or university because of the high cost to attend. As a counselor working with amazingly talented and eager students, having them share this hesitancy became a frustratingly common reality. Factoring in that these students are earning a high school diploma from the State of Maryland, it just didn't quite make sense. Now, in fairness, college as a post-secondary option wasn't fully closed, but it almost became more productive to look at private institutions who might be willing to provide large financial aid packages before recommending in-state public colleges and universities where students may have to pay out-of-state tuition. In the end, options for undocumented students grew limited and often unreliable.

Keep in mind, that if students have not had the good fortune of successfully navigating all the way through the process of earning legal residency status and/or work authorization, an apprenticeship/trade program, or other jobs straight out of high school become nonviable. As a result, and almost by default, attending college in some format becomes the only true post-secondary option for undocumented students.

As you may know, a prospective undocumented college student must pay Maryland taxes for 3 years prior to graduating to be eligible for Maryland Dream Act. This would qualify them for in-state tuition and for state financial aid. This is a great resource! That said, it requires that students have parents or caregivers who are knowledgeable enough to take the immediate steps needed to get the 3-year clock running. Failure to do so and students may run into costs that could run double or triple the cost of the already soaring tuition costs. Even if the family is doing all the correct things right away, time may be a factor where they can only provide 2 years out of the 3 required at the time of high school graduation, which may result in the student taking a year off just to afford tuition.

At this point, I contend that this process is entirely too cumbersome for families to navigate and limits the options available to students who could ultimately become assets to our community by becoming our next wave of teachers, nurses, and entrepreneurs.

For these reasons, I ask for a FAVORABLE REPORT on SB637.