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The Honorable Ben Barnes, Chair House Appropriations Committee 120 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: Opposition to HB 1245 – Protecting Career Counseling for Maryland Students

Dear Chairman Barnes and Members of the House Appropriations Committee and the Ways & Means Committee,

My name is **Sharita Ali**, and I am proud to be **Central Middle School's Cobra Career Coach since November 2023**. As a career coach working directly with Maryland's students, I am writing to express my strong opposition to SB 852, which would eliminate the Career Counseling Program for Middle and High School Students. This program is critical in preparing young people for their future careers, connecting them with real-world workforce opportunities, employer networks, and in-demand career pathways. Eliminating it would be a significant step backward for Maryland's students, workforce, and economy.

I am not here fighting for my job—I am fighting for my **students** and a **program that changes lives**.

While **Superintendents focus on the dollars and cents**, we focus on **students and the partnerships that make this program successful**.

We don't just talk about **career readiness**, we **ignite passion**. We **plant seeds** and bring energy that excites students about **internships, apprenticeships, and careers** they never knew existed.

Even the **quietest students** start **discussing their futures** when career coaches enter the room. Career coaches create a **safe space** for students to learn about **self-advocacy, teamwork, grit, and soft and hard skills**, showing them how they translate to the real world.

As a career coach I empower students to **dream big** through **vision boards**—because a budget sheet shouldn't limit their future.

Our **community partners believe in this initiative**—just like we do. I advocated bringing **back middle school campus tours at Salisbury University (SU)**, even after they were discontinued post-pandemic. Our initiative chartered a bus and 55 students, staff and parents of 8th grade students traveled to SU, had a SU student led tour and lunch in their dining hall with the college students and then shopped for memorabilia in the bookstore before returning to Central Middle. Our partners, **Anne Arundel Community College, The Board of Health, and CAT South showed up for the entire day for a Mini Science Fair that a teacher requested me to plan and host within a two week period** for 400 7th-grade students who just finished studying anatomy. Our partners shared their career pathways and journeys into the medical field.

Our students explored sensory neurons in the body and learned about various medical careers such as Cognitive Neuroscientist, Orthopedic Surgeon, Physiatrist, Nurse Practitioner, Occupational Therapist, Lab Technician, and Pathologist Assistant.

The students learned about the effects of smoking, the dangers of vaping and smoking marijuana at a young age, and the importance of proper nutrition and sports drinks. They also had the chance to practice CPR on adult and child dummies with guidance from both the Department of Health and AACC and learned how to treat open wounds with AACC. Students also explored the programs offered by Anne Arundel Community College that provide pathways into the medical field without requiring a four-year degree.

At the career coach, Anne Arundel Student Career Excellence table, students disassembled and reassembled four skeletons and three torso models, examined a life-size spine model, discussed spine disorders with their teacher, and assembled a life-size brain and heart models. Additionally, the students enjoyed playing the game Operation, though many found it challenging to keep a steady hand, resulting in frequent buzzing from the patient!

In addition, Central Middle School (CMS) **6th graders** took ownership of their futures by creating their own **Career Club (CCATS - Career Club and Teaching Students)** and **illustrating the connection between academics and careers**. In our program, students **earn more than incentives**—they **earn confidence through edutainment activities such as career trivia**, exploring their strengths through **personality and interest surveys**, and **discovering the vast world of careers beyond the obvious**.

Prior to my role, CMS never had a career fair. As a career coach I brought in 35 professionals to meet **8th-grade students** in my first year. This year, that number greatly increased to **over 90 professionals from the community**, engaging, informing and educating the **entire school community**. These numbers communicate an impactful **story**—our **students are being seen, heard, and prepared for success**. I **appointed over 20 student ambassadors** each career day who would not typically be recognized and gave them a **leadership role**. And they excelled; this year, they encouraged each other to wear black and white to be uniform. My students proactively created a dress code to present a unified appearance during their career day fair, it demonstrated a significant success in my career coaching efforts, showing their school community how they are actively engaged in their career exploration, taking ownership of their professional image, and showing a mature understanding of the importance of first impressions in a professional setting.

Career coaching helps **level the playing field** by ensuring that **ALL students** have access to career information, guidance, and support. A strong **career coaching pipeline from middle to high school** fosters **Early career awareness, Informed decision-making, and Preparation for life after graduation**.

Career coaching should not be a privilege but a right for every student, regardless of background. Cutting this program means **closing doors for students** who rely on career coaching to shape their futures. As a career coach, I work with students, employers, and educators to ensure young people understand career options, apprenticeships, and workforce training opportunities. Removing this program would:

- **Hurt students** by limiting their access to career exploration, job readiness training, and employer connections.
- **Hurt employers** who rely on a skilled talent pipeline to meet workforce demands in high-growth industries.
- **Hurt Maryland's economy**, as students graduate without clear pathways into family-sustaining careers, leading to higher unemployment and skills gaps.

This program is **not just a line item in a budget**, it is a **lifeline for students** who need **guidance, inspiration, and opportunity**. While **Superintendents debate dollars**, we are out here **changing lives**. **Investing in our students is not an expense—it is our best investment.**

Rather than eliminating a program that is already proving successful, Maryland should be investing further in career coaching and workforce-aligned career counseling. I urge you to reject HB 1245 and preserve the Career Counseling Program for Middle and High School Students. Maryland must continue investing in the future of its students, ensuring they have the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to thrive in their careers and contribute to our state's economy.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome the opportunity to share more about how career coaching is positively impacting students across Maryland.

Sincerely,

Sharita Ali

Career Coach
Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation