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Chair Brian J. Feldman
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland State Legislature
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Subject: Testimony in Support of House Bill 0298 – Maryland Higher Education Commission –
Demographic Data Collection – Parental Status

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Tabitha Pitzer, and as you may notice, I am from Oregon. You may be asking yourself: why does someone in Oregon care about legislation passed in Maryland? My care comes from my strong support for HB 0298 and how sharing classrooms with parenting students has enriched both my educational and personal experiences.

If you look at the legislative history of HB 0298, you'll see it was first introduced in 2024. However, my experience with this bill started a decade ago. I was a student at Oregon State University and was a member of a non-profit organization called the "Oregon Student Association". We were going through a process called "issue choosing" to set our legislative priorities. During issue choosing, students host what is probably the most depressing science fair. Trifolds on tables fill a room displaying our most pressing issues: rising cost of tuition and textbooks, housing insecurity, food insecurity, lack of student support systems, etc. This is where I met Michaela Martin, a parenting student that changed my life forever.

Michaela was trying to pass a HB 0298 in Oregon. Like many students in Maryland today, Michaela was a parenting student trying to balance the demands of being a single mother and a scholar. Michaela can tell her story better than anyone else, so I strongly encourage you to hear her story in her own words (either by reading her testimony or listening to this podcast:
<https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/1-in-5-episode-3-meet-michaela-martin/>)

With a clipboard, branded buttons, and fierce dedication, Michaela worked the room to try and convince a group of primarily non-parenting students to care about her experience. Unfortunately, she was not successful. I pledged to Michaela that I would stay by her side until we passed the bill. It took us six years to do so. Six years to pass the bill to start collecting the data that we need to enable policymakers and institutional leaders to make informed policy decisions. Six years to pass the bill to start the process of understanding the barriers that parenting students face that hinder their academic success. Six years for the issue of insufficient access to childcare on the national level to get so bad that it could not be ignored at the state level.

How much could we have learned about this population during those six years of waiting? How much could we have helped parenting students in that time? You see, “[w]hen you are invisible, so are your problems.” – Michaela Martin. Students like Michaela enriched my education and my life. Her unique and insightful presence on campus and in the classroom brought in new ways of thinking. By sharing her experience with her peers, we all learned more than we would have just from imagining what her lived experiences have been like. Not to mention how much my life and lifelong learning has been enriched from what started as a pledge to be a legislative battle buddy and blossomed into a lifelong friendship. There are Michaela’s all over Maryland. Parenting students like Yoslin Amaya Hernandez who are insightful, enriching, and caring peers, movers, and shakers.

Today, you have a simple choice: be the kids in the room that don’t care, or be a legislative battle buddy. Let parenting students remain invisible, or see them, hear them, and help them.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support HB 0298 and take this vital step toward creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for student parents.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tabitha Pitzer