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The Honorable Brian Feldman, Chair
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: Opposition to SB 852 – Protecting Career Counseling for Maryland Students

Dear Chairman Feldman and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee and the Budget and Taxation Committee,

As an assistant program director for career coaches 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.

Career coaching is an invaluable resource in Maryland, helping students become career-ready. During the 2023-2024 school year, I had the privilege of serving as a career coach for middle school students, contributing to the inaugural year of middle school career coaching. This experience allowed me to build strong relationships with students, families, and the broader school community.

As a career coach, I am also a mother of two children who attend schools within the Old Mill Cluster. This dual role has given me a unique perspective on advocating not only for my own children but also for other students in our community who may not have a voice or someone to advocate for them. I recognize the barriers that exist, preventing students from exploring their passions and pursuing their dreams. For many, the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" has lost its spark. This once-exciting question is now clouded by societal barriers, misinformation, and discouraging voices that stifle student dreams. Career coaching helps restore that spark, allowing students to once again envision their futures and understand that their dreams are achievable. Through mentorship, career exploration, and development, career coaching connects students with the resources and guidance they need to make their aspirations a reality. Ultimately, career coaching provides a safe space for students to rediscover what they

have been led to believe is impossible, helping them dream big and know that their dreams are within reach.

As career coaches, we work collaboratively with school staff, students, and their families to drive transformational changes. Our support extends beyond students, as we also empower families by connecting them to valuable opportunities through the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation—opportunities that have the potential to impact entire generations. Many families would not have been aware of these resources if it weren't for the efforts of career coaches in bringing them to light. In just 1.5 years of service, students have already expressed the significant impact career coaching has had on their lives. They are beginning to connect the dots about what their future might look like after high school graduation and how to attain successful outcomes. Through career coaching, we hope to help families and students break down systemic barriers and inspire them to dream again. Our goal is to uplift communities by providing them with knowledge about the evolving workforce and the tools they need to succeed.

Collaborating with my school team was absolutely essential to my success. I am incredibly grateful that my principal was always supportive and open to new ideas—he never once discouraged me or said "no." His encouragement played a major role in the success of my first year as a career coach. During the 2023-2024 school year, I had the opportunity to facilitate a range of impactful activities, including a three-week career day, resume-building workshops, life skills training, guest speakers, alumni presentations from a nearby high school, and so much more. The success of the year can be attributed to the collective belief in the power of these initiatives and the commitment to making a real impact.

As an Assistant Program Director in the second year of Maryland's Blueprint for Education, I continue to witness career coaches innovatively guiding students in middle and high school. In middle schools, career coaches collaborate with school counselors to share valuable career information and prepare students for the career pathways available in their network schools by offering career centric activities in classrooms and throughout the day. In high school, career coaches are addressing missed opportunities from middle school, ensuring that students are aware of the resources and possibilities they may not have known about earlier. Our high school career coaches continue to develop career plans with students, so that when they conclude their senior year, they are making more informed career decisions and plans. It is important that these students are answering to the needs of the workforce and have the employable skills that employers are looking for in the 21st and 22nd century.

The partnerships within school communities are growing stronger as educators and staff come to realize how the Blueprint benefits and impacts students, rather than taking away from them. One crucial aspect that has often been overlooked is the fact that some students are not interested in pursuing college. The message that it's okay not to follow a traditional college path has often

been missed, but career coaches are helping to shift that narrative. There are countless career pathways that can lead students to success—many of which don't require a four-year degree. This is the transformational work career coaches are doing every day: inspiring, motivating, and helping students align their academic efforts with their career aspirations. As students begin to understand their own journey, we hope it leads to more successful outcomes not only in the workforce, but their lives. We envision a future where students graduate without the burden of debt, armed with degrees and skills that allow them to live the life they've dreamed of. Ultimately, this work empowers families to progress, breaking free from societal systems that too often create barriers to advancement. Career coaching is helping to build a future where students and families can thrive, not regress.

Parenting two teenagers is no easy task, but having the support of career coaches who speak my teens' language has been a game-changer. It's amazing how they seem to listen when someone else says the exact same thing I do! Thanks to my daughter's career coach, she's explored incredible opportunities and has applied to many of them. She's learned the value of paid internships and apprenticeships through their shared journey of career discovery. Without her career coach guiding her, she wouldn't have connected with the professional who is now offering her an opportunity in the veterinary field. My youngest daughter has explored a variety of interests but has always known she wanted to work within the STEM and political fields. Thanks to her career coach, she has been able to explore nursing and activism, expanding her horizons in ways I couldn't have imagined. As an educated parent, I know there are gaps in my knowledge, and I've realized I don't always know what I don't know. Career coaches have filled that gap. They've been a vital part of my support system, and now that they're here, I can't imagine doing this journey without them.

Career coaching has been a true blessing—an answer to my prayers. So, when the superintendent association refers to us as a "train wreck," I can't help but reflect on the "train wreck" they are perpetuating by insisting they have all the answers. Their refusal to embrace innovative ideas from others and their lack of willingness to role-model such behaviors stand in stark contrast to the vision of a thriving, forward-thinking community. We are forced to confront the unfortunate reality where students are pushed toward college paths they do not want to take, often leading to discouraging and unrealistic outcomes. At the same time, we risk losing the diversity needed to strengthen our workforce, especially in the trades, a sector vital to our success. Without prioritizing trades, we risk stagnation and regression, unable to advance as a society or nurture the very elements that strengthen and sustain our communities.

Students deserve the opportunity to pursue their dreams without an education system that restricts their choices or eliminates the professionals who guide them in making informed, strength-based decisions. Career coaches are essential in building a future where students are empowered, not limited by outdated systems. As a career coach and assistant program director, 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.

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 SB 852 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,

La-Toya Jones
Assistant Program Director
Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation