

Testimony in Support of SB0851

Presented by Dhruv Dobariya

On Behalf of Illuminate Maryland

Maryland General Assembly – 03/05/2025

Dear Senator Zucker, Vice Chair Boyce, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Dhruv Dobariya, a sophomore from River Hill High School, and I am proud to testify today on behalf of Illuminate Maryland, a student-led advocacy organization dedicated to equity, accessibility, and community well-being. We work to ensure that all Marylanders—especially youth—have a voice in shaping policies that affect their daily lives. Today, I urge you to support SB0851, a crucial bill that ensures Maryland’s public schools are both physically accessible and adequately prepared to support students with disabilities in emergency situations.

This issue is not just theoretical, it has real, lasting consequences for students and their families. I want to share a personal story that highlights the urgent need for this legislation.

A close friend of mine, Sanjay, is a student who uses a wheelchair due to a mobility impairment. Despite Maryland’s commitment to inclusion, the reality they faced in their own school was anything but accessible. Their school, built decades ago, had a main entrance without a ramp. Instead of entering with their peers, they were forced to use a side door, often left locked or obstructed, requiring them to wait for a staff member to let them in—making them late for class and separating them from the rest of their peers.

Beyond the daily indignity of being treated differently, the lack of accessibility posed a serious safety risk. During a school fire drill, the designated accessible exit was blocked by construction materials, and because emergency procedures had not accounted for students with disabilities, and he could’ve been left without immediate evacuation assistance. This was not just an inconvenience—it was dangerous. The message was clear: the school was not built for everyone.

SB0851 would ensure that situations like this never happen again.

By requiring schools to annually report their ADA compliance status, we ensure that inaccessibility issues are identified and addressed, rather than being ignored or dismissed as a low priority. Too often, issues like malfunctioning ramps, inaccessible doors, and unsafe conditions for students with disabilities go unreported for years. This bill ensures transparency and urgency in fixing these barriers.

Local school systems would be required to submit emergency plans to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to ensure compliance with accessibility regulations. No student should fear being left behind in a fire, lockdown, or other emergency simply because their school failed to plan for their needs.

Critics may argue that requiring schools to track and report on accessibility comes at a financial cost. However, this bill is not demanding new construction or large-scale renovations overnight—it is simply asking schools to assess, report, and plan. Identifying accessibility issues is the first step toward a safer, more inclusive education system.

No student should feel like an afterthought in their own school. SB0851 is not just about ramps, doors, or emergency plans—it is about dignity, safety, and equal access to education. Illuminate Maryland stands firmly in support of this legislation, and we urge the committee to issue a favorable report.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,
Dhruv Dobariya
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