

**Testimony of The University of Baltimore School of Law's Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff
Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC)**

In Support of SJ 0005

Elementary and Secondary Education - Curriculum - Importance of Diversity

March 5, 2025

Dear Chairperson Brian J. Feldman, Vice-Chairperson Cheryl C. Kagan, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Shahbano Syed, and I am a current second-year student and a student fellow for The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) at the University of Baltimore School of Law. The CFCC envisions communities where children and families thrive without unnecessary involvement in the legal system. We engage communities in all that we do to work towards transforming systems that create barriers to family well-being.

CFCC strongly supports SJ 0005, which seeks to incorporate a more culturally diverse curriculum that includes the history of communities that have experienced discrimination in elementary and secondary schools. This bill would **create an inclusive learning environment for all students, foster empathy and understanding, and positively contribute to student's social-emotional development.**

I. SJ 0005 would create a more inclusive learning environment for a diverse student population.

Maryland schools are becoming increasingly diverse, and the current student population is 33% White students, 33% Black/African American students, 22% Hispanic/Latino students, and 7% Asian students.¹ Despite a diverse student population, studies reveal that approximately 90% of children's books depict White characters and narratives, while Black, Indigenous, and people of color account for the remaining 10%.² Another study details a strong preferential treatment of specific outlooks, particularly the White

¹ Maryland State Department of Education, *Maryland at a Glance*, <https://strategicplan.marylandpublicschools.org/maryland-at-a-glance/>, (Last visited Mar. 31, 2025).

² Armstrong, Amanda, *A Troubling Lack of Diversity in Educational Materials*, (Mar. 9, 2022), <https://www.edutopia.org/article/troubling-lack-diversity-educational-materials/>.

perspective, in the incorporation of a school curriculum, which can have lasting consequences for students who are from diverse backgrounds.³ A pattern of underrepresentation of racial and ethnic backgrounds can be troubling and could negatively impact a student's overall academic achievement and sense of belongingness.⁴ SJ 0005 will foster a more inclusive curriculum for all students, with care and consideration of their diverse backgrounds. SJ 0005 will help promote a more equitable learning environment, all while promoting and appreciating the unique differences that each student brings to the classroom.

II. SJ 0005 would foster empathy and understanding amongst students.

Empathy is a precursor to accepting diversity, as it helps us understand and relate to the feelings of others.⁵ Studies reveal that reading can promote the empathetic quality in children, which would be further enhanced when children are provided with learning materials and books with characters from diverse backgrounds.⁶ Additionally, incorporating diversity in the curriculum for students early in their education can result in more respectful and prosocial interactions among students, regardless of their differences.⁷ A lack of exposure to a curriculum that helps students understand other students from different backgrounds risks the opportunity of becoming a cohesive, compassionate collective and could potentially result in conflict. SJ 0005 would help students acknowledge the discrimination embedded in our society towards students of color and help build empathy and understanding toward these differences.

III. SJ 0005 would positively contribute to student's social-emotional development.

Mental health comprises our psychological, emotional, and social well-being, and it can significantly impact a student's engagement in the classroom and relationship-building with others.⁸ A culturally diverse curriculum can positively contribute to a student's academic and social-emotional development.⁹ Students not represented in the curriculum are more likely to feel invisible and disengaged in the classroom.¹⁰ A more inclusive approach to curriculum can help these students feel more seen and result in positive

³ Iweuno, Blessing N., et al., *Impact Of Racial Representation In Curriculum Content On Student Identity And Performance*, (Jul. 28, 2024), <https://wjarr.com/sites/default/files/WJARR-2024-2280.pdf>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Viers, Karen, *Teaching Empathy: A Precursor to Accepting Diversity*, (May 2022), <https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1904&context=honors>.

⁶ Samuel, Rachel, *Why It's Critical for Students to "See Themselves" in Classroom Materials*, (Feb. 19, 2020), <https://readtolead.org/why-its-critical-for-students-to-see-themselves-in-classroom-materials/>.

⁷ American University, *Diversity in the Classroom: Teaching, Types, and Examples*, (Jan. 27, 2023), <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/diversity-in-the-classroom/>.

⁸ Choudhury, Mohammed, *Mental Health in Schools*, (Feb. 22, 2022), <https://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/2022/0222/MentalHealthinSchoolsFebruary2022V2.pdf>.

⁹ Iweuno, Blessing N., et al., *Impact Of Racial Representation In Curriculum Content On Student Identity And Performance*, (Jul. 28, 2024), <https://wjarr.com/sites/default/files/WJARR-2024-2280.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

academic achievement.¹¹ Further, Research reveals that a student's learning experience is impacted by what they see, including seeing themselves in a positive light in a book for class. Something as simple as that can help affirm their sense of self and support others who view them from a different perspective that promotes diversity.¹² A student exposed to this diverse outlook can become more understanding and less apathetic towards minority groups.¹³ SJ 0005 would help historically underrepresented students feel more seen and improve their overall social-emotional well-being in and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

SJ 0005 will improve the learning environment, all while fostering empathy and understanding and positively contributing to each student's social-emotional development.

For these reasons, the CFCC strongly supports SJ 0005 and urges a favorable report.

¹¹ Samuel, Rachel, *Why It's Critical for Students to "See Themselves" in Classroom Materials*, (Feb. 19, 2020), <https://readtolead.org/why-its-critical-for-students-to-see-themselves-in-classroom-materials/>.

¹² Iweuno, Blessing N., et al., *Impact Of Racial Representation In Curriculum Content On Student Identity And Performance*, (Jul. 28, 2024), <https://wjarr.com/sites/default/files/WJARR-2024-2280.pdf>.

¹³ *Id.*