

Sarah Crichton

Regarding SBo268 (Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee)

Friday, January 17, 2025

Thank you senators for reading my testimony. My name is Sarah Crichton and I'm a public high school teacher in south Baltimore. I am testifying in support of SBo268 because this bill will meaningfully increase college access for my immigrant students.

I have served immigrant students and families in Baltimore City and New York City public schools for 18 years. My interest in advocating for immigrant students has grown out of my relationships with numerous undocumented students and families over the years. Half of my students at Benjamin Franklin High School are immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. They are outstanding students—resilient, hardworking, ambitious, and kind. They are true believers in the American Dream. Many nurture hopes of graduating from college in the United States.

Maryland is among the most progressive states in funding college access for all, including undocumented students. However, I have seen firsthand how state income tax requirements prevent most of my immigrant students from accessing this financial aid. Our college-bound immigrant students often discover in their senior year that they must pay out-of-state tuition unless their parents can pay three years of state income taxes. For a family making \$25,000 a year, this would amount to \$3,832. Many immigrant families are unable to afford this. These students face a devastating “benefit cliff”—instead of receiving a free or subsidized college education, they face out-of-state tuition totalling \$9,000 to \$40,000 a year. (Immigrant students in New York, Colorado, and Illinois do *not* face similar benefit cliffs because they are considered “residents” for tuition purposes if they graduate from a high school in that state.) Due to this financial barrier, a majority of my high school's immigrant graduates do not go to college, including students who have taken pains to become college-ready by maintaining a high GPA, learning English, and taking AP courses.

The primary barrier to college access for immigrant students is cost. A second barrier is the difficulty of navigating Maryland's complex financial aid policy. Most teachers (and many guidance counselors) are unaware of the policy. Those of us who are aware find it difficult to communicate the policy to our students with accuracy and sensitivity. Part of my work as an advisory teacher is to educate my 10th grade students about the college process. On the one hand, I want to spread the good news—in Maryland a high quality college education is free if you have a 2.3 GPA! On the other hand, I have to explain the asterisk attached to this promise for my students who are not citizens or green card holders. It hurts immigrant students to find out that they are held to a different standard to prove their residence in Maryland.

The difficulty of communicating this policy means that most of our immigrant students and families do not find out about the MSFAA income tax requirements until senior year. To navigate this process successfully, immigrant families need bilingual experts to explain the policy clearly, guide them through the process of

getting an ITIN number to pay back taxes, reassure them that their information will not be shared with immigration authorities, and then complete the MSFAA. This process is lengthy and time-consuming for schools and families. My school has over 300 immigrant students and one expert on staff—not enough to meet the demand. Further complicating matters, many immigrant students live in the United States with an aunt, uncle, cousin, or older sibling while their parents (their legal guardians) remain in their home country.

Even when undocumented families have the funds and the support they need to comply with MSFAA requirements, they are often deterred by fear that information disclosed on these forms will lead ICE to their door. Often students want to proceed with this process but don't have the support of a parent or guardian. Without this substantial family support, undocumented students are left with the option to pay out-of-state tuition, which is now \$40,000 at the University of Maryland. This is why my best student, Kiki, will graduate this spring with a 3.8 GPA and then return to Honduras despite her desire to go to college in Maryland.

The best solution to this equity of access problem would be to eliminate the income tax requirement completely and establish residency in the state through graduation from a Maryland high school and an affidavit affirming intention to reside in the state (as New York State does). Passing SBo268 would be a meaningful step in the right direction that would reduce the cost of back taxes by hundreds of dollars for the immigrant families in my community. It would be a significant step toward equity of opportunity for immigrant youth.

Investing in the education of immigrant youth makes financial sense for Maryland. As a middle-aged public school teacher in Baltimore (a city with a shrinking population and tax base), I am concerned about the long-term solvency of entitlements in my city and state. Population growth through immigration is essential to maintaining a prime-age workforce decades into the future, which will enable us to honor our pension commitments to public sector workers. More educated immigrants will earn more and contribute more tax revenue as adults. We already invest substantially in the K-12 education of our immigrant youth. We should pass SBo268 to expand access to the benefits already provided in the Maryland Dream Act.

Thank you for your hearing my testimony and for your attention to this important bill.