

Subject: Favorable HB583
To: House Ways and Means Committee
From: Rania Dima
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Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am writing in support of public virtual school access for all Maryland children.

When my autistic son was just ten years of age, he endured relentless bullying to the point where the school requested he stay home so they could address the entire grade. In elementary school, my daughter was so overloaded and distracted by the constant stimulation and noise that she came home each day sobbing, not just from sheer relief, but also because she could finally use the bathroom. At school, even the sound of the toilet flushing had become too overwhelming. My other daughter lived with such anxiety and stress that she stopped eating. Instead of a place to learn, each classroom became a potential death trap vulnerable to school shootings. Instead of being protected by the adults, she was told that the older boy sexually harassing her was a “good kid,” while another stalked her online pretending to be a stranger who knew detailed information about her. I have watched all three of my neurodivergent children fall through the cracks of the traditional classroom. Instead of gaining an education, they have been traumatized and scarred. But then came virtual school and everything changed. My younger daughter, who was falling behind, now makes the honor roll every single term. My older daughter, who was a C/D student, fell in love with learning and put her eye on medical school. After two years in virtual, she enrolled in an early college program with straight As every term. None of this would be possible without their virtual education. My son had already graduated, but he too would have thrived in the virtual setting. Every child in Maryland deserves this same opportunity.

The CDC has released data showing that students have “need for safer and more supportive schools” and that students who feel “school connectedness” have “more positive outcomes.”⁽¹⁾ According to the Institute of Education Sciences, “trauma can have a detrimental impact on student’s functioning in the school setting.”⁽²⁾ Several innovative districts in Maryland have established synchronous virtual programs which in turn have empowered many students to achieve their full potential through equitable

and high-quality education.

Children enrolled in Frederick County Public School's (FCPS) Remote Virtual Program (RVP) have testified at our county level that they have been traumatized by chronic bullying and harassment, some to the point of suicidal ideation. Some have felt isolated and alone, and others have engaged in outright school avoidance. Many have been overwrought by sensory overload which has a biological basis⁽³⁾ and made worse by overcrowded classrooms. Whether general or special ed, these students are simply unable to focus on their education in the traditional brick and mortar setting. Their testimonies are attached and can be viewed on YouTube.⁽⁴⁾ We, the families, have witnessed first-hand how access to a synchronous virtual education has changed our children's lives for the better. Their grades, test scores and confidence have increased along with improvements in their mental health and well-being.

Metrics show that 46.7% of students enrolled in RVP are eligible for Free and Reduced Priced Meals compared to 32.4%⁽⁵⁾ in FCPS's general student body. Additionally, 36.1% in RVP are special needs students with IEP or 504 plans compared to 17.1%⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾ system-wide. Often, these children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, ADHD or other neurodivergent or behavioral conditions. The significant difference in metrics for both demographics suggest that these marginalized children are not getting an equitable education in the traditional setting but have found it in a virtual school. Maryland policies should protect this inclusive and equitable modality of learning for these highly-vulnerable children and for their general education peers who learn better digitally.

A seat in a virtual school will cost less than a seat in person because there is no overhead or maintenance associated with a building. Furthermore, a virtual education eliminates the expenses of additional staff and resources that would otherwise be required in-person. The Center on Inclusive Technology and Education Systems recognizes that "many 504 [and IEP] accommodations provided to students in traditional classroom settings are easily met by virtual programs" because they are already "found in the learning management systems and other software programs used in virtual schools."⁽⁷⁾ While virtual learning is not for everyone, neither is the traditional classroom. House Bill 583 will guarantee that all children across Maryland have the option to access a virtual education. I urge you to support HB 583.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony.

Rania Dima

References

- (1) <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2024/p0806-youth-mental-health.html>
- (2) https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/appalachia/events/materials/04-8-20-Handout3_common-trauma-symptoms-and-helpful-strategies-for-educators.pdf
- (3) <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2013/07/107316/breakthrough-study-reveals-biological-basis-sensory-processing-disorders-kids>
- (4) <https://www.youtube.com/@SaveFCPSMDRVP>
- (5) <https://www.fcps.org/about/fast-facts>
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- (7) <https://cites.cast.org/binaries/content/assets/cites/resources/cites-vs-iep504-a11y.pdf>