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Ways and Means Committee

Maryland General Assembly, Annapolis, MD 21401

Testimony in Opposition to SB0656 with Recommended Amendments - Baltimore County Board of Education - Alterations of Elected Member Districts and Establishment of Redistricting Process

Hearing Date: March 27th, 2025

Chairperson and Esteemed Members of the Committee,

My name is Maureen Wambui, and I am a resident of Legislative District 8 in Maryland. I am writing to express my **opposition to Senate Bill 656** as it currently stands. While I understand the intention of this bill, to provide more localized representation and ensure that the Baltimore County Board of Education is more closely aligned with population changes, I have concerns about its potential negative impact on minority communities. I believe that these concerns can be addressed through specific amendments, and I respectfully ask for the committee's consideration of these proposals.

Concerns:

1. Risk of Fragmentation of Minority Communities

One of my major concerns is that the **district-based election system** could disproportionately disadvantage all minority communities that are not concentrated in one area. Many minority populations in Baltimore County are spread across multiple districts and may not have the political power needed to influence redistricting or elect representatives who truly advocate for their needs.

- Without safeguards in the redistricting process, there is a risk that district lines will be drawn in such a way that divides these communities, making it harder for their voices to be heard.

2. Potential for Gerrymandering

The proposed redistricting process opens the possibility of gerrymandering, where district boundaries are manipulated to benefit certain political factions at the expense of others. This could result in inequitable representation for minority and immigrant communities, who may already face barriers to full participation in the political process.

- Redistricting should be done with the utmost transparency and with a focus on ensuring that every community has fair access to political power.

3. Exclusionary Political Divisions

The introduction of district-based elections could create a greater focus on local interests within individual districts, potentially leading to political fragmentation. This could deepen divides between communities, making it more difficult to address county-wide educational issues that affect everyone, regardless of district.

- Minority groups may find it more difficult to advocate for broad, inclusive policies, as their concerns could become overshadowed by local district issues.

Recommended Amendments:

To ensure that SB0656 does not negatively affect minority and immigrant communities, I propose the following amendments:

1. Create a committee to Oversee Redistricting with Community Input

The redistricting process should be transparent and inclusive. I recommend creating a nonpartisan committee composed of community stakeholders, including representatives from the minority groups, that will review proposed districts before they are finalized.

- This will ensure that district lines are drawn fairly, without the risk of political manipulation, and will give marginalized communities a voice in the process.

2. Protect Communities of Interest

To prevent fragmentation, I recommend including a provision that mandates the protection of communities of interest, particularly those with high concentrations of minority populations.

- District lines should not divide communities that share similar socio-economic concerns, educational challenges, or cultural identities. This will help ensure that these communities maintain cohesive representation.

3. Ensure Equal Access to Redistricting Resources

The process should be accessible to all communities, including those with limited political experience or resources. I recommend providing resources in multiple languages and ensuring that immigrant communities are actively engaged in the redistricting process.

- Community workshops, informational sessions, and easy-to-understand materials should be made available to help everyone understand how the process works and how to get involved.

4. Periodic Reviews of Representation Equity

After the new district lines are established, there should be a review mechanism in place

to assess whether the redistricting has resulted in equitable representation for all communities, including the minorities.

- If disparities are found, the process should be open to adjustment to correct any imbalances.

While the intention behind SB0656 is to provide more effective and localized governance, the bill as currently drafted risks undermining the political power of **the minority communities** in Baltimore County. With the proposed amendments, we can ensure that these communities are fairly represented and have equal access to the political process. I strongly urge the committee to adopt these amendments to make this bill more inclusive and equitable for all residents of Baltimore County.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,

Maureen Wambui