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House Bill 52: Election Law - Voting Age - Board of Education Elections (Your School, Your Voice Act)

Hearing before the House Committee on Ways and Means, January 21, 2025

Position: FAVORABLE

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a nonprofit legal services organization which advocates for social justice, and economic and racial equity in Maryland, including by upholding the rights of historically excluded and underserved students through individual representation, community outreach, and systemic advocacy. We are committed to making discipline responsive to students' behavioral needs, fair, appropriate to the infraction, and designed to keep youth on track to graduate.

The PJC supports House Bill 52, in which Maryland would lower the age to vote in an election for members of an elected county board of education to 16, empowering young people to have a meaningful voice in the decisions that directly impact their education and futures.

At 16, students are already deeply embedded in the educational system. They experience the effects of policies set by school boards daily, from curriculum choices and extracurricular funding to decisions about mental health resources and school safety protocols. Allowing them to vote in school board elections recognizes their firsthand perspective and acknowledges their stake in these outcomes.

Research supports the readiness of 16- and 17-year-olds to engage in civic responsibilities. Studies show that individuals in this age group possess the cognitive ability to make informed decisions comparable to older voters. By establishing voting habits early, Maryland could increase the likelihood of lifelong civic engagement and foster a generation of informed, active citizens who are accustomed to participating in democracy from an early age.

Several towns in Maryland—Takoma Park, Greenbelt, Hyattsville, Riverdale Park, Mount Rainier, and Somerset—have already lowered the voting age to 16 for their local elections. These communities have recognized the importance of including younger residents in local decision-making, reflecting a growing understanding that 16- and 17-year-olds have a significant stake in local issues, particularly education, and should have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

Critics might argue that 16-year-olds lack the maturity or knowledge to vote responsibly. However, these same young people often shoulder significant responsibilities, such as working part-time jobs and paying taxes. They are already contributing members of society, and many demonstrate a keen awareness of social and political issues through activism and volunteer work. Denying them the right to vote in elections that directly affect their lives undermines their role as stakeholders in their school community.

The Public Justice Center is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and as such does not endorse or oppose any political party or candidate for elected office.

Additionally, lowering the voting age can strengthen our democratic system by expanding the electorate and encouraging a more inclusive dialogue. Engaging young voters ensures that school boards consider the needs and concerns of students, leading to more representative and effective governance. It also sends a powerful message that their voices matter, reinforcing the value of active participation in our democratic institutions.

In conclusion, lowering the voting age to 16 for county board of education elections empowers students to shape the policies that affect their education while cultivating lifelong habits of civic engagement.

For these reasons, PJC supports House Bill 52.

For more information contact:

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