

Mr. Chair, Madame Vice-Chair, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

My name is Katherine Juhasz and I am testifying in support of Senate Bill (SB) 685.

In 2024, on an otherwise unremarkable day, I received an email from my children's elementary school that one of my daughter's teachers would be indefinitely out of the classroom and a long-term substitute would be in place. No one knew anything about the details of why the teacher would be unavailable until a few weeks later, when the news that the teacher had been removed due to credible allegations of sexual assault spread like wildfire through our community. Panicked parents were scrambling for information on a Friday afternoon, desperate for support and guidance about how this news would affect their children. Over the weekend, parents reassured one another that surely the school would release an update on Monday morning.

Unfortunately, that update never came. Parents were left in the dark about how to speak with their children, what support or resources might be available to help their families, and how to discuss the circumstances with other parents within the school who were not even aware that allegations had been made. The lack of readily available information made a horrific situation worse, traumatizing our entire community and eroding trust between families and the school. As time went on, resources were shared from parent to parent, including lists of reputable trauma-informed therapists, evidence-informed guides for how to broach difficult topics like child abuse with your children, and what to do if a child discloses abuse. These resources could have been shared much more quickly and efficiently if they had been distributed en masse and publicly instead of being limited to word of mouth.

SB 685 is the road map we desperately needed. Had this bill been in place, it would have made a significant difference for my family and that of so many others. In the event of credible allegations, communicating clear, timely information about what steps are being taken and which resources are available is essential and should not vary from one family to the next or even one school to the next. Every parent should have access to the same resources, so that they can best support their children. Clear information reduces the spread of misinformation and the fear that comes from not knowing where things stand. Mandating an after-action report, to review what was done well and what could be done better in the future, ensures that the system continues to improve and is aligned with the Maryland State Board of Education's mission to advocate for continuous improvement of Maryland's educational system.

I was unaware that our elementary school had a 30-day automatic email deletion cycle until I reviewed this bill. I am astounded by the fact that this was in place, and hopeful that SB 685 passes to ensure that communications are retained in order to allow for thorough review in the event of future allegations. SB 685 prioritizes system-wide transparency and support, which were the two things most lacking in our community in the aftermath of the allegations.

I fervently hope that you will support SB 685, thereby voicing your support for our children and their wellbeing.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Katherine Juhasz