

**Testimony on House Bill 649– Favorable
HB 649 – Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland Act
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee**

April 1, 2026

Dear Honorable Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee,

EdTrust, a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy & advocacy organization working to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system **offers favorable testimony in support of HB 649 – Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland Act.**

At its core, HB 649 is about ensuring that every student in Maryland is protected, valued, and given a fair opportunity to learn. This bill would strengthen and expand Maryland’s existing anti-discrimination protections, providing a critical pathway to redress for students who can no longer rely on the federal system to support them and, as a result, are left to learn in unsafe or discriminatory environments. By extending anti-discrimination protections to students in higher education, the bill ensures Maryland’s most vulnerable students are protected when they choose to pursue an advanced degree. Furthermore, the bill provides new avenues of redress for families who have faced discrimination at the K-12 level by creating an option to file a civil action, and allowing the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR), a trusted independent agency with a long history of fighting discrimination across the state, to support students in need.

Civil rights protections are not peripheral to student success. They are central to it. When students experience discrimination or are subjected to inequitable policies, it directly undermines their ability to access rigorous coursework, feel safe in their learning environments, and fully engage in their education. This has a proven negative impact on students’ [attendance](#), [educational outcomes](#), and graduation rates. Strong, enforceable civil rights protections are essential to creating conditions where all students can thrive.

Currently, Maryland’s state-level protections fall short. Existing law applies only to Pre-K to 12 students and does not extend to higher education, leaving many students to rely solely on federal enforcement mechanisms. Unfortunately, those federal protections, long a critical backstop, are no longer reliably accessible. Over the past year, we have witnessed a significant erosion of federal civil rights enforcement capacity. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR), which for decades has been a primary avenue for students and families seeking redress, has experienced [major staffing reductions](#), office closures, and mounting delays. In [March of 2025](#), the Trump Administration placed more than half of OCR’s staff on administrative leave and closed seven of its twelve offices. This drastic reduction in force has increased the workload of Maryland’s closest federal OCR office by nearly 1,000 cases – all while terminating many of the staff members tasked with addressing them. As a result, hundreds

of open investigations, including over [300](#) involving Maryland students, have stalled, and families face increasing barriers when attempting to file or resolve complaints.

Unfortunately, students, families, and advocates across the country are [struggling](#) to navigate this weakened system. Complaints go [unanswered](#) and investigations take far too long. In some cases, families simply give up because the process feels inaccessible or ineffective. When enforcement breaks down, rights on paper do not translate into protections in practice.

HB 649 responds to this urgent crisis. By establishing clear, comprehensive state-level protections and empowering the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights to investigate and resolve complaints, the bill ensures that students are not left without recourse when discrimination occurs. Furthermore, the bill also appropriately extends protections to higher education students and allows families to seek justice through state courts, which are critical tools at a time when federal pathways to redress are increasingly uncertain.

Importantly, HB 649 does not create new rights so much as it safeguards and reinforces long-standing civil rights principles that are currently at risk due to federal inaction. It ensures that Maryland can uphold these protections independently, rather than relying on a federal system that is, at present, unable to meet the needs of students.

For EdTrust, this is about more than compliance. It is about opportunity. When students are protected from discrimination, both intentional and systemic, they are more likely to attend school regularly, access advanced learning opportunities, graduate, and pursue postsecondary success. Conversely, when discrimination is left unaddressed, it compounds inequities and limits life outcomes.

Maryland has an opportunity to lead by guaranteeing that every student, regardless of race, gender identity, disability, or background, has meaningful, enforceable anti-discrimination protections throughout their educational journey. HB 649 is a critical step toward this goal.

For these reasons, EdTrust urges the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee to **issue a favorable report on House Bill 649.**

Sincerely,

Ciara Hart

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