



Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment
Written Informational Testimony:
House Bill 649 — Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland Act

Chair Senator Feldman and Members of the Committee:

Attendance Works is a national initiative dedicated to improving school attendance policy, practice, and research. Our core mission is to advance student success by reducing chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, whether excused or unexcused by supporting schools, communities, and policymakers in creating the conditions where every student feels safe, connected, and motivated to attend. We work with a particular focus on the students who face the greatest barriers to consistent attendance: students of color, students with disabilities, students experiencing poverty, and other historically underserved populations. We submit this testimony to provide information about the value and importance of House Bill 649 related to addressing barriers to attendance.

Discrimination Is a Direct Driver of Chronic Absence

Our 2019 report, *Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning* (co-authored with the American Institutes for Research), identifies four interconnected conditions that determine whether students attend school consistently:

- 1) physical and emotional health and safety,
- 2) belonging, connectedness, and support,
- 3) academic challenge and engagement, and
- 4) adult and student social-emotional competence.

When these conditions are in place students are motivated to attend and can contribute to establishing the trust necessary to mitigate and eliminate real barriers. When these conditions are absent or undermined, chronic absence follows.

Discrimination directly attacks all four of these conditions. A student who experiences bias, harassment, or discriminatory discipline does not feel safe, does not feel they belong, and is far less likely to find school engaging or worth attending. Research is clear that stress, fear, and experiences of identity-based harm trigger physiological and psychological responses that undermine cognitive performance, self-regulation, and the sense of connection to school that keeps students coming back. When discrimination goes unaddressed, it communicates to students and families that the institution does not value their presence. That message is one of the most powerful drivers of avoidance and disengagement we know.

The students most affected by chronic absence nationally and in Maryland are the same students most likely to experience discrimination: students of color, students with disabilities, students from low-





income families, and LGBTQ+ students. Exclusionary discipline that disproportionately remove these students from the classroom are a well-documented contributor to chronic absence.

The Collapse of Federal Enforcement

Maryland students and families who experienced education discrimination have long relied on the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) as a meaningful avenue for relief. Since March 2025, more than half of OCR's staff have been placed on administrative leave, and seven of its twelve regional offices have been closed. When students experience discrimination and have no effective avenue for relief, the signal sent is that their experiences do not matter.

HB 649 Creates the Conditions That Support Attendance

By authorizing the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR), an agency with a 99-year history and newly expanded capacity to investigate and resolve education discrimination complaints across Pre-Kindergarten – 12th grade and higher education, HB 649 rebuilds an accessible, independent, and state-grounded enforcement pathway. For attendance this matters because each element of the bill maps directly onto the conditions for learning that drive student attendance:

- **Prohibiting discrimination and retaliation** restores the physical and emotional safety that is a prerequisite for regular attendance. Students who know their environment is legally protected are more likely to feel that school is safe to attend.
- **An independent enforcement agency** builds the institutional trust that families need to feel connected to and supported by their children's schools. Our research, including evaluations of parent-teacher home visit programs, consistently shows that family trust and connection are among the strongest predictors of reduced chronic absence.
- **Disparate-impact protections** address the discriminatory discipline patterns that disproportionately push students of color and students with disabilities out of classrooms and into chronic absence.
- **Civil action rights** give students and families meaningful agency; the belief that something can be done is itself a protective factor against disengagement and avoidance.

Every day a student avoids school because of discrimination is a day of learning lost and a signal that their school has failed to create the conditions that make education possible. House Bill 649 is a civil rights measure, and it is a measure that supports attendance and student engagement. It creates the legal foundation under which all students, especially those who have been most marginalized, can trust that showing up to school is safe and fair.

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Attendance Works

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