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To: Chair Senator Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair Senator Cheryl G. Kagan, and Members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Re: SB 554 — Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners – Appointment Process Alterations

Position: Favorable with Amendments

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Committee Members:

As a resident of Baltimore City's 40th District, I write to express serious concerns regarding the longstanding governance, accountability, and performance challenges within Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). For more than two decades, BCPS has experienced repeated scandals, fiscal mismanagement, and academic underperformance, despite steadily receiving increased funding.

Student outcomes remain troubling. Attendance and graduation rates have declined, standardized test scores remain among the lowest in the nation, and persistent issues—such as grade manipulation, social promotion, school violence, and deferred maintenance—continue to undermine public confidence. At the same time, administrative staffing and compensation have expanded significantly, with limited evidence of corresponding improvements in student achievement.

According to publicly available payroll data, more than 100 BCPS employees earned over \$150,000 in 2023, including a dozen non-teaching administrators earning over \$200,000 annually. These figures stand in stark contrast to declining academic outcomes and enrollment.

Governance and Accountability Concerns

Baltimore City voters and the Baltimore City Council currently have minimal influence over the appointment of the members of the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners. Of the 12 board members, nine are appointed by the Mayor, two are elected citywide, and one is a student representative. In contrast, 19 of Maryland's 24 school boards are fully elected.

Given the scale of BCPS—serving more than 77,000 students, employing approximately 8,600 staff, and operating with a \$1.7 billion annual budget—greater public oversight and accountability are warranted. The Board's authority to hire and retain senior leadership, including the Superintendent, without meaningful City Council involvement has contributed to a lack of transparency and public trust.

Record of Persistent Underperformance

Over the past 20 years, BCPS has faced repeated academic failures, financial crises, and operational scandals, including budget deficits, corruption within facilities management, grade-changing scandals, inaccurate enrollment reporting, and chronic infrastructure neglect. Despite significant increases in funding, student achievement indicators—such as graduation rates, attendance, SAT scores, and NAEP performance—have consistently declined relative to state and national benchmarks.

BCPS students continue to rank near the bottom among large urban districts nationwide, while enrollment has fallen by thousands of students over the past decade. Meanwhile, administrative staffing has grown, and per-student spending has increased substantially.

School Safety and Climate

School safety remains a critical concern. Reports of violence, weapons, and assaults persist, while enforcement and disciplinary actions have declined sharply. Public reporting suggests that incidents are frequently underreported to avoid negative designations, further eroding trust and accountability. Tragically, students have continued to lose their lives to violence, underscoring the urgency of meaningful reform.

Conclusion

Baltimore City children deserve a school system that prioritizes student learning, safety, transparency, and fiscal responsibility. SB 554, with the proposed amendments, represents a necessary step toward restoring accountability, strengthening governance, and ensuring that public input plays a meaningful role in the leadership of Baltimore City Public Schools.

I support SB 554 and respectfully urge the Committee to consider the following amendments:

Amendment 1:

Require all newly appointed and future BCPS Board members to be vetted and approved by a majority vote of the Baltimore City Council. The Council should hold at least one public hearing to receive testimony from Baltimore City residents prior to confirmation.

Amendment 2:

Grant the Mayor of Baltimore City the authority to select, appoint, and remove the BCPS Superintendent, subject to approval by a majority vote of the Baltimore City Council.

These amendments would introduce essential checks and balances, increase transparency, and restore public confidence in the governance of Baltimore City Public Schools.

Thank you for your consideration and your continued service to the people of Maryland.

Respectfully submitted,

Lou Fields