

House Bill 649:

Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland

Hearing before the Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment

April 2, 2026

Position: FAVORABLE

My name is Jenai Johnson. I am a PhD student in Higher Education, a former K–12 educator, and an adjunct instructor. Through my work in education and community spaces, I have worked with students and communities from a range of backgrounds and have witnessed firsthand the inequities and discriminatory practices that impact students and families. Ensuring equal educational opportunity is essential, particularly as many continue to face barriers that limit access to the resources and support needed to succeed.

HB 649 strengthens protections against discrimination in education and improves how Maryland enforces civil rights laws in schools. It helps ensure that all students in Maryland have equal access to education regardless of race, color, ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy, age, marital status, or disability. Jenai strongly supports HB 649.

Current state laws do not fully protect Maryland students and families. Maryland’s existing education anti-discrimination law (Md. Code, Educ. §§ 26-701 to 26-705) is enforced by the Maryland State Department of Education and applies only to preK-12 students. Maryland law does not explicitly cover students in higher education. These students must rely on federal anti-discrimination laws. While federal laws have prohibited discrimination in education for decades, enforcement of these laws has become harder to access. Maryland families now have fewer practical options for filing complaints with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights because of staffing reductions, processing delays, and a high rate of complaint dismissals.

HB 649 creates a new state law to expand both protections and enforcement. The bill authorizes the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights, an independent state agency, to investigate and resolve complaints of discrimination involving public and private preK-12 schools and higher

education institutions. The law would protect students from intentional discrimination and from policies or practices that have an unjustified discriminatory impact. It would also allow students and families to bring education discrimination claims in state court.

It is important to remember that efforts to ensure equal opportunity exist because of longstanding inequities that continue to shape educational access and outcomes. HB 649 is an important step toward strengthening protections and ensuring that students and families have meaningful avenues for accountability and support.

For these reasons, Jenai respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 649. For more information, please contact:

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