



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 Francesca Onianwah, and I am a current fellow representing The Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative in Advocacy for Children, Youth and Families. The Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative is a child advocacy initiative that is dedicated to developing true champions for children who advocate for the voices of children in the legislature, where they often go unheard. With the understanding that every issue is a child's issue, the Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative believes that educational equity is of utmost importance in strengthening Maryland's education outcomes. Access to a safe and supportive educational environment where students are fully guided in their academic journey is necessary for the future success of a student, making it an undeniable right that all students, whether in preK-12 or higher education, deserve.

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. The Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative in Advocacy for Children, Youth and Families 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.

As of 2025, the Office for Civil Rights holds nearly 300 open cases of discrimination in elementary-secondary and post-secondary schools in Maryland. This number highlights a clear lack of an adequate anti-discrimination response from the Maryland State Department of Education. As the Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative strives towards its mission of advocating for different youth populations, we recognize how this bill is essential in addressing the thousands of Maryland students in higher education who are left unprotected from discrimination under current law. HB 649 meets the moment by ensuring students and families in higher education have the tools to properly advocate for themselves and fight discrimination in schools.

For these reasons, The Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative in Advocacy for Children, Youth and Families respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 649. For more information, please contact:

Brandi Onuwu Slaughter
Program Director, The Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative in Advocacy for Children, Youth and Families
bslaught@umd.edu