

## **TESTIMONY FOR HB565**

### **HB 565 County Boards of Education – Elections – District Voting (Fair Representation Act) Presented to the Government, Labor and Elections Committee**

**February 9, 2026**

#### **FAVORABLE**

Dear Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and members of the Government, Labor and Elections Committee,

My name is Miriam Klapka. I live in St. Mary's County. I am writing in support of HB565.

To my knowledge, this is the 4<sup>th</sup> attempt to get this bill passed in nearly as many years:

- 2021: HB655. Included both County Commissioners and Board of Education
- 2023: HB447. County Commissioners only
- 2025: HB391. Board of Education only

St. Mary's County is comprised of four commissioner districts. The Board of Education districts are aligned with the commissioner districts. The Boards, Education and County Commissioners, are each comprised of five members, one from each district and one who runs at-large.

Each of the four districts has unique character; likewise, the voters in each district can differ in significant characteristics, i.e. race, culture, religion, income, profession, etc. In addition to demographics, the four districts differ politically. Districts 1 and 2 have a plurality of Republican voters. District 3 has a majority of Republican voters. And District 4 has a plurality of Democratic voters.

There is no fair argument for a 20,000-voter district board member to be elected by 90,000 county voters. Each district's voters should be able to elect a board member who represents their interests and values, and also have the ability to remove board members who fail to support district priorities. At-large voting negates the different values and priorities of the districts.

A couple of examples demonstrate the consequences of at-large voting. Although I use examples that refer to the County Commissioners rather than the Board of Education, the principles are the same: at-large voting results in communities unable to get a seat at the table and unable to hold their at-large-elected representative accountable.

2012: The number of Republican registered voters surpassed the number of Democratic registered voters in the county. Since then, in three elections, 2014, 2018, 2022, only Republicans have been elected to the Board of County Commissioners. The three elections prior to 2012 were bipartisan.

2021: By a vote of 5-0, the commissioners opposed HB745 that increased the number of Early Vote Centers (EVC) in St. Mary's County from 1 to 2. Their letter stated: "We do not believe this legislation would benefit the citizens of St. Mary's County." Increased voter access benefits all voters. The Board's opposition was not questioned.

2021: The county's code for the Redistricting Board states the board "shall be composed of one appointee made by each member of the Board of County Commissioners." At the time, voter registration for the county was approximately 26000 registered Democrats, 31000 registered Republicans, and 17000 registered as Unaffiliated. Despite community calls for a bipartisan board, the Commissioners appointed five Republicans to the five-member Redistricting Board.

2022: In the General Election, a Board of Education candidate for District 1 received more votes from District 1 voters than her opponent. In a district voting system, she would have won the election. But she lost the election due to at-large voting.

My vote for my district board member cannot carry its proportional weight within my district; rather it shrinks under the aggregate weight of the entire county.

The time has come to abolish at-large voting.

I end with mentioning the biggest advantage, in my opinion, of district voting. District voting defines and strengthens accountability of elected board members.

I urge a favorable report on HB565.

Thank you for your time and consideration.