



**Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 649
Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland**

Committee on Government, Labor, and Elections
February 24, 2026

Dear Honorable Chair Wells and Members of the Committee,

CASA is a national powerhouse organization building power and improving the quality of life in working-class: Black, Latino/a/e, Afro-descendent, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities. With a membership of over 190,000 members, CASA creates change with its power-building model blending human services, community organizing, and advocacy to serve the full spectrum of the needs, dreams, and aspirations of members. We provide multiple education services to youth and adult immigrants in Maryland including college and career readiness, workforce and life skills ESOL, and vocational training.

CASA is pleased to offer favorable testimony in strong support of HB 649, Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland. House Bill 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.

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 (MSDE) 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. The U.S. Department of Education has further demonstrated a disregard for its role in upholding anti-discrimination laws by its aggressive push to dismantle Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives at the state, local and institutional level. Additionally, the racially motivated and unlawfully executed detention of Black and brown community members across the state serves to exacerbate concerns that individual cases of discriminatory behavior within higher education will go unchecked by the U.S. Department of Education.

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. At a time when the federal government has stepped away from its watchdog role, it is critically important that the State steps in to ensure all Marylanders can continue to access higher education with confidence that their civil rights will be upheld and that there will continue to be appropriate consequences when a violation of those rights occurs.

For these reasons, CASA respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 649.