

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Brandon Russell, and I am a resident of Maryland. I am writing in support of HB565, and **urge a favorable, with amendments report on this bill.**

I propose **amending** this bill to include language requiring any locally districted elected offices be elected by a plurality of votes from each district. Additionally, I propose listing this as an **emergency bill**—voting rights cannot wait until 2028.

In St. Mary's County, four members each of the Board of Education and the Board of County Commissioners must run in a district, while the fifth member runs at-large. However, all five elected positions for each board are voted on at-large. The existence of districts suggests that voters within those districts choose their own representative, but in practice they do not. This system is confusing, misleading, and creates an unnecessary barrier to voter understanding and engagement.

At-large voting also restricts the ability of constituents to hold their elected officials accountable. Voters in rural District A may prioritize issues like infrastructure, while voters in a more urban and populous District B may have very different concerns. When all votes are cast countywide, the priorities of larger districts can consistently override those of smaller or more rural communities, even when those communities are electing "their" district representative.

Moreover, at-large voting discourages a diverse and representative candidate pool by diluting the voting power of specific communities and groups with shared interests. Our democracy functions best when everyone has a meaningful voice. Women, African American, LGBTQIA+, and other minority candidates have run—and lost—in districts that could be competitive under true district-based elections.

At-large voting results in leaders being elected who participate in group-think, without diversity of thought, without the true representation of the entire community. I have watched as the Calvert County & St. Mary's Boards of Education repeatedly ignored constituents with whom they disagree. I have watched the County Commissioners do the same. All because they know they have the at-large voting system to protect them from accountability.

It's time for the General Assembly to take bold action to protect the one-person, one-vote promise of American democracy. I urge a **favorable, with amendments, report** on HB565.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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