



# THE CHOICE PROGRAM AT UMBC

THE SHRIVER CENTER

## House Bill 649

**Advancing Equal Educational Opportunities for All Students in Maryland**

**House Committee on Government, Labor, and Elections**

**February 24, 2026**

**Position: FAVORABLE**

The Choice Program strongly supports HB 649. HB 649 strengthens protections against discrimination in education and improves how Maryland enforces civil rights laws in schools. It is a critical step toward confronting and dismantling structural racism in Maryland's education system. 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.

As a mentoring program, we have served more than 27,000 Maryland youth who are systems-involved since 1988. Presently, Choice works with young people and their families in Baltimore City, as well as Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Harford Howard, Prince George's, Montgomery, Harford, and Anne Arundel Counties. Choice serves as an alternative to the school-to-prison pipeline. Our primary goal is to reduce the number of Black and Latine young people who are ensnared in the youth legal system. Our model seeks to dismantle racist structures and instead employs strengths-based approaches focused on Positive Youth Development. We hold high expectations for youth and parents, along with high levels of support. These guiding principles are essential in addressing racial inequities at both the individual and systemic levels.

Through our daily work in schools and communities, we see first hand how disparities in discipline, access to academic opportunities, and school climate disproportionately and adversely affect Black and Latine students, students with disabilities, among others. When discriminatory practices go unaddressed, they contribute to exclusion from school, deeper systems involvement, and long-term inequities. Strengthening state-level protections is a critical

step in dismantling these patterns and ensuring that all young people have a fair chance to succeed.

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 pre K–12 students. Maryland law does not explicitly cover students in higher education, leaving those students to rely primarily on federal anti-discrimination laws. While federal laws have long prohibited discrimination in education, enforcement has become increasingly difficult to access. Families now face staffing reductions, processing delays, and high dismissal rates when filing complaints with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

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 as well as policies or practices that have an unjustified discriminatory impact, recognizing that racism often operates through systems, not just individual acts.

It would also allow students and families to bring education discrimination claims in state court.

**For these reasons, The Choice Program respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 649.**

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