

TESTIMONY

HB 901 - EDUCATION - PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS -- RECOGNITION OF EXTERNAL DIAGNOSIS OF AUTISM

February 25, 2026

Delegate Denise Roberts

Madam Chair Wilkins, Madam Vice Chair Feldmark, and honorable members of the Ways and Means Committee, for the record, I am Delegate Denise Roberts from District 25 in Prince George's County, Maryland and thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 901, Education – Public School Students – Recognition of External Diagnosis of Autism.

For many Maryland families, the longest journey is not from home to school; it is from “something is wrong” to “someone finally listened.” Parents wait months or years for evaluations, miss work, and fight insurance just to secure an autism diagnosis for their child. When they finally bring that diagnosis to their child’s public school, they are often told, in effect, “Thank you — now we’ll start all over again.” HB901 is about ending that second wall and making our systems work together for children instead of making families start from scratch.

Just this past weekend, I co-hosted an Autism Supports Summit for parents with Prince George’s County Council Chair Krystal Oriadha and Prince George’s County Board of Education District 7 member Dr. Phelton Moss. Room full of parents, grandparents, and caregivers who love their children fiercely — and I cannot tell you the number of heartbreaking stories we heard. Story after story of families who did exactly what we tell them to do, got the diagnosis, and still could not get their public schools to move. My office, the Council Chair’s office, and Dr. Moss’s office get an incredible number of calls from constituents who are parents of autistic children facing these same barriers. Something needs to be done, and HB901 is one concrete, targeted step.

HB901 is simple and deeply reasonable. The bill requires a public school to recognize an external diagnosis of autism from qualified medical, mental health, or educational professionals, to begin a school-based evaluation within 30 days once that diagnosis and parental consent are received, and to determine appropriate supports during that evaluation period based on that external diagnosis and its recommendations. Under the amendments prepared by the Department of Legislative Services, schools retain the authority to decide which supports to provide and may adjust, add, or eliminate supports as necessary during the evaluation window.

Those amendments sharpen the balance. On page 1, the bill now directs schools to “determine the appropriate supports to provide,” rather than automatically

“provide certain supports,” underscoring that decisions remain with the school team. On page 2, the bill specifies that supports are determined “based on the diagnosis and any recommended supports,” and it expressly allows schools, during the evaluation period, to make appropriate changes to what is provided. HB901 honors the work families have already done to get a diagnosis while keeping school-based decisions, including IEP and placement determinations, where they belong — with the public school team under State and federal law.

This bill fits squarely within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act framework. IDEA already requires a full and individual evaluation, a finding of adverse educational impact, and a determination of the need for specially designed instruction and related services. HB901 does not change those standards; it accelerates and informs them. An external diagnosis becomes a trigger for timely action — convening the team, reviewing data, and making informed decisions — not a substitute for the public school’s obligations.

Behind the policy are real children and real families in our public schools. In my community and across Maryland, I hear from parents of children with autism and from relatives — including an aunt with two nephews on the spectrum, one of whom required a specialized placement outside his home district funded by his local public school system. Their stories are different, but the pattern is the same: families do everything we tell them to do, yet still hit delay after delay once they walk into the school building. HB901 says that when a family has already climbed the mountain to get a diagnosis, the public school system should meet them halfway.

HB901 is also bipartisan. Members from both parties have come together around this bill, recognizing that when a child is diagnosed with autism, timely support in our public schools should not be a partisan question. This is a Maryland public-school issue, and we are offering a Maryland public-school solution that respects families, clinicians, and the professional judgment of our educators.

At its core, HB901 says that an autism diagnosis should open the door to timely, thoughtful support in our public schools, not drop families into a new maze. HB901 moves Maryland toward best-in-the-nation practice in how our public schools respond when a child receives an autism diagnosis, and I respectfully ask for a favorable report on the bill with the amendments. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.