

Testimony in Support With Amendments House Bill 655 - Parent and Guardian Accountability Act Before the House Ways and Means Committee

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and distinguished members of the Committee.

My name is The Honorable Dr. Cashenna A. Cross. I serve as a Councilwoman at Large in the City of Glenarden, a United States Air Force veteran, and a lifelong advocate for youth development, family stability, and community safety. My professional and public service career has focused on strengthening families while ensuring that public systems respond with both accountability and compassion.

I appear before you in support of House Bill 655 with important amendments.

Across Maryland, educators, parents, and local leaders are witnessing an increase in disruptive and violent incidents that are rooted not only in school behavior but in unmet social, emotional, and family support needs. Schools cannot solve these challenges alone. When a child repeatedly demonstrates harmful behavior, it is often a signal that intervention must extend beyond the classroom and include family engagement and professional support.

House Bill 655 correctly recognizes that parents and guardians are essential partners in a student's success. Requiring notice and structured counseling participation creates an opportunity for early intervention before behavior escalates into long term academic failure or involvement with the juvenile justice system. As someone who has trained thousands of leaders and worked closely with youth and families in crisis, I understand that timely engagement changes outcomes.

However, accountability must be balanced with access and fairness. Many families face barriers including transportation challenges, work schedules, lack of insurance coverage, and limited availability of culturally competent counseling providers. Without safeguards, the bill risks penalizing families who are willing but unable to comply due to circumstances beyond their control.

For this reason, I respectfully request the following amendments:

First, include a good faith compliance provision allowing parents or guardians to demonstrate reasonable effort to obtain counseling when services are unavailable or delayed.

Second, require school systems to provide verified referrals to accessible counseling services, including virtual options and community based providers, prior to enforcement action.

Third, ensure that courts consider economic hardship, caregiving responsibilities, and documented service access barriers before imposing penalties.

Fourth, encourage coordination with local governments and community organizations to expand preventive behavioral health programs rather than relying solely on punitive measures.

With these amendments, House Bill 655 will strengthen shared responsibility between schools and families while maintaining equity and practical implementation.

Maryland succeeds when we intervene early, support families, and hold systems accountable to provide real pathways to success. This legislation, thoughtfully amended, can help restore safe learning environments while preserving dignity and fairness for families working to do the right thing.

I respectfully urge a favorable report with amendments.

Respectfully submitted,

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