

Hearing 1/29 1:00 PM
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TESTIMONY ON HB0014- POSITION: FAVORABLE

**County Boards of Education - Bullying, Harassment, or Intimidation - Information
Collection and Reporting Requirements**

TO: Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee

FROM: Seva Gandhi

My name is Seva Gandhi. I am a resident of District 16 and a junior at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, MD. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0014, County Boards of Education - Bullying, Harassment, or Intimidation - Information Collection and Reporting Requirements.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club (WDC) for the 2026 legislative session. WDC is one of Maryland's largest and most active Democratic clubs with hundreds of politically active members, including many elected officials. I am a part of the WDC's NextGen initiative, which empowers young people to have a voice on the state and county level.

As a student and an Asian American — a demographic whose data is commonly aggregated — this issue hits close to home. By improving data collection and reporting on school bullying and harassment, this bill will improve the ability of school administration to understand and address bullying and harassment faced by students. While the Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are already required to report on bullying and harassment, the current report combines reporting on all races and ethnicities, all religions, all perceived sexual orientations in groupings that obscure the specific ways in which students may be targeted for their identities. HB0014 will enable the collection of better, more actionable data on the personal characteristics targeted by bullying and harassment.

The bill will amend the current process to disaggregate the data for the LEA and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) report on bullying, harassment and intimidation by specific races, ethnicities, religions and other designated classes. This additional information is vital to school administrators' ability to identify targeted groups and the ways in which individuals in those groups are targeted—and so to design district, school, and classroom strategies to address bullying and harassment. The bill will also require each district to share the data with its community via district website.

Improved reporting is especially important now; bullying and harassment continues to rise since the pandemic. In the most recent MSDE Report on Bullying, Harassment and Intimidation incidents of bullying, harassment and intimidation increased statewide by over 12%. Only five LEAs had decreased incidents, but others had very high increases, including Montgomery County, which saw a 40% increase in these incidents.

Bullying, harassment and intimidation are key drivers of chronic absenteeism, which has increased significantly since 2020. When individuals are specifically targeted for their identities in school or by fellow students out of school, they are likely to disengage. In addition to school absence, bullying and harassment can contribute to mental health issues, specifically when the bullying is focused on characteristics that the youth cannot change. Other detrimental effects (according to a review of research published in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry) include lifelong impacts on physical health and socioeconomic status. The authors recommend that interventions need to clearly identify the underlying factors.

This bill is essential to the ability of schools to intervene in bullying and harassment. It will enable the collection, analysis and sharing of more and better data to better understand bullying, harassment and intimidation incidents in school. This data is critical to the ability of school administrators to understand and address bullying and harassment, improve school climate, and enable more children to feel safe in school.

I ask for your support for HB0014 and strongly urge a favorable Committee report.