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Testimony in Support of SB 339

BILL NO: SB 339

BILL TITLE: Maryland School for the Deaf - Membership of Board of Trustees – Alterations

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee

POSITION: SUPPORT

HEARING DATE: March 25, 2026

Statement of Purpose

To Chair Delegate Wilkins, Vice Chair Delegate Feldmark and Members of the Committee:

My name is John A. Serrano and I am writing to strongly urge a **favorable report on SB 339**. This legislation, jointly requested by the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD) and its Board of Trustees, proposes critical updates to the Board's composition to ensure more efficient, accountable, and representative governance.

History and Role of the Maryland School for the Deaf

Since 1868, the Maryland School for the Deaf has provided tuition-free public education to deaf and hard of hearing students from across the state, serving them from birth through age 21. As the only public school in Maryland specializing in this field, MSD operates campuses in Frederick and Columbia to provide a bilingual signing environment where every student has access to language, learning, and community. The school offers a full range of academic programs, extracurriculars, and a residential program for those living beyond commuting distance. To manage this complex institution, the Board of Trustees holds primary governance and fiduciary responsibilities, which include appointing the Superintendent, adopting policies, and overseeing annual operating and capital budgets to safeguard public resources.

Strengthening Deaf Leadership

A primary achievement of this bill is the permanent protection of a Deaf majority in the school's leadership.

- **Current Law:** Requires a board of up to nineteen (19) members, with no fewer than six (6) being Deaf.
- **Proposed Change:** Decreases the maximum size to thirteen (13) members and increases the minimum number of Deaf members to seven (7).
- **Impact:** This ensures the Board will always maintain a Deaf majority, ensuring that governance is guided by leaders with lived cultural and linguistic expertise.

Modernizing Governance for Efficiency

At nineteen members, the current Board is larger than is typical or necessary for a state the size of Maryland, which can complicate deliberation and diffuse accountability.

- **Alignment with Comparable Bodies:** A 13-member board aligns MSD more closely with the Maryland State Board of Education, which consists of 14 members. Furthermore, a review of Maryland's local public school boards show a standard range of 5 to 13 members, placing this proposal squarely within established state norms.
- **National Research:** Research into out-of-state programs and schools that function similarly to MSD, operating as independent state agencies with their own governing boards, reveals that such boards typically do not exceed 9 members. Reducing MSD's board to 13 is a significant step toward these leaner, more effective national models.
- **Operational Benefits:** A smaller board can reach quorum more consistently and conduct business in a timely manner, reducing delays in routine governance.
- **Fiscal Responsibility:** A reduced size lowers costs associated with full-day meetings, including meals and related expenses, resulting in more responsible use of public resources.

Conclusion

SB 339 centers the voices of the Deaf community while positioning the school for long-term institutional effectiveness. It is a common-sense modernization that supports the students, staff, and families of the Maryland School for the Deaf.

Having passed the Senate unanimously and the House has advanced its cross-filed bill, I respectfully request your favorable report.

Sincerely,

John A. Serrano,
Superintendent, MSD