

Date: February 25, 2026
To: Delegate Jheanelle K. Wilkins, Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
From: Rob Malone, CEO, The Arc Prince George's County
Re: Support - HB901 Support Education - Public School Students - Recognition of External Diagnosis of Autism

Thank you Chair Wilkins and committee members for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB901.

I am writing in strong support of the proposed bill that would require schools to provide services to children with autism and recognize external diagnoses from qualified professionals until the school completes its own evaluation. This bill is crucial to ensuring that children with autism receive the timely support and services they need to thrive.

The number of children diagnosed with autism has been growing steadily over the past few decades; Part of this increase can be attributed to improved awareness, broader diagnostic criteria, and better access to evaluation services. However, research still shows a significant rise in diagnoses that suggests an actual increase in prevalence as well. In 2023, the CDC released its latest estimates for autism prevalence, showing that **1 in 36 children** in the U.S. has been diagnosed with autism. This reflects a continuing trend of rising diagnoses.

As you may know, autism is a complex developmental disorder that affects each child differently. Early diagnosis and intervention are essential for improving outcomes for children with autism. However, too often, schools delay services for children who have already been diagnosed by external professionals, causing unnecessary delays in critical support. These delays can result in children falling further behind academically, socially, and emotionally.

A report by the *National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center* (2012) demonstrated that early intervention is cost-effective, as it reduces the need for more intensive services later in life. Early treatment for speech delays, for example, prevents long-term complications and minimizes future educational and social support costs.

The *Heckman Equation* (2016) shows that investing in early childhood interventions, including speech therapy, yields a high return on investment. For every dollar spent on early childhood education, there's an estimated return of \$7 in long-term economic benefits, including reduced costs in special education and improved workforce productivity.

Beyond the researched based impacts, we know how much anxiety, frustration and hopelessness can build in parents as they see their children lag behind without any supports. I was recently at a forum for parents who have children on the autism spectrum and a number of

them expressed concerns with delays in services and being told to give their children more time to catch up.

I urge you to support this bill, which will ensure that children with autism receive the services they need when they need them. Recognizing the diagnoses from qualified professionals will help provide these children with the necessary support to succeed in school and in life. Early intervention is critical to their future, and this bill will provide the tools to ensure that they are not left behind.

When trusted, licensed professionals raise concerns about developmental limitations of our children, we need to act to provide supports to assist them as soon as possible. The Arc stands with our families and asks for you to move this bill forward with a favorable report.