

Good afternoon, Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and distinguished members of the Ways and Means committee.

My name is Michelle Lowrey, and I am a lifelong resident of Maryland's Eastern Shore. I have my Master's degree in Elementary Education, am certified to teach gifted and talented students, had the privilege of teaching first grade in public schools for 13 years, and now for the past 13 years, have had the joy of being a homeschool educator. I am responding in favor of HB 1528, with amendments. I am excited that our General Assembly is considering adopting legislation to allow homeschooled students to participate in public school athletics, as well as extracurricular activities.

I've attached a document to my testimony that myself and another homeschool educator, Melanie Mobarek, developed with the help of the Home School Legal Defense Association's (HSLDA) website which shows, with links, how all 50 states currently treat homeschooled students' participation in public school extracurricular activities, including sports teams as well as other activities. Currently, 37 states have laws allowing homeschooled students to participate in extracurricular activities with a variety of guidelines for their participation. This bill, with some additional work, would bring Maryland into the growing majority of states supporting the rights of homeschooled students.

The current bill, HB 1528, is a great start to address the issue of homeschool participation in public school sports and extracurricular activities, however it lacks several important components:

1. A clear authorization statewide, not leaving it up to individual school districts or schools,
2. Clarity in the present bill whether the homeschooled student needs to register with the public school,
3. A clear statement that homeschooled students have the same rights to try out for a team, club, etc. as public school students, since we all pay the same taxes. There should be no "placement priority" as currently stated in the bill.

1. I believe that Maryland should adopt a statewide authorization for homeschoolers to participate in public school extracurricular activities from the start, not leaving it ambiguous and up to local districts/schools to decide participation. This state-wide decree would also compel the Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association (MPSSAA) to amend their rules to include homeschooled students without the potential of school districts incurring penalties or other sanctions, especially if one school district favorably accepted homeschooled students, and one did not.

The passing of this bill would give access for homeschooled students to play competitively on high school teams, become certified as an NCAA athlete, and be seen by recruiting colleges, enabling the possibility of college scholarships.

Currently, the only other option for homeschooled students is travel teams- if they exist for the sport of interest, and if it is financially feasible for the family. This is especially true for the residents of the Eastern Shore because of the travel distance and expense. Even with these possible opportunities, it is more likely that college recruiters will look at high school teams over a travel team.

2. It is not clear in the language of the proposed bill whether the homeschooled student should register with the public school. If homeschooled students are to register with their local public high school to participate in extracurricular activities, the expectation should be clearly defined by the state of Maryland regarding registration. If they are registering to play a sport or participate in a club, or CNA program, then the registration should make that clear to avoid any truancy or other issues. For example, when my oldest son was still in high school, he was permitted to register with Easton High School (EHS) and take part in their Naval JROTC program, according to the 10 U.S.C. 2031(F)(1) passed in 2020. He excelled in NJROTC and was awarded a Marine Corps full ride scholarship at Virginia Military Institute.

3. Lastly, the current writing states that a public high school shall give placement priority to a student enrolled in the school if there are a limited number of spaces available for students in a given activity. We pay the same taxes as public school families and should have the same opportunities given to our students. The ratio of homeschooled students to public school students should not create a sudden lack of space in any program offered.

Again, I am in favor of HB 1528 and implore you to pass it with the requested amendments. This bill has minimal burden and low cost, but enormous positive impact for the homeschooled students of Maryland. I would love to be of assistance in any way, if permissible.

Most Kindly,

Michelle Lowrey

Homeschool Educator