

Testimony in Support of HB 1545

Special Education Video and Audio Recording Program

Janie Monier, Frederick County Parent and Community Member

My name is Janie Monier. I am a parent, a community member, a registered nurse, and a daughter of two parents with disabilities and caregiver. I am here in support of HB 1545.

As a nurse, I was trained to assess for abuse. You learn to read the signs that a patient cannot or will not tell you themselves. Unexplained bruising. Behavioral changes. Flinching at the wrong moment. You learn to look because the person in front of you may not be able to speak for themselves. And you learn something else: how long harm can go undetected when there is no one with the authority, the access, or the accountability to see it. When it is not assessed for as a pediatric patient, they come back to the hospital as adults bearing the psychological scars of their trauma.

The children in self-contained special education classrooms are in exactly that position. They are among the most vulnerable people in our public schools. Many are either nonverbal or have difficulty with language expression. Many cannot reliably report what happened to them. The research on this is unambiguous. A 2022 systematic review published in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, covering data from over 16 million young people across 25 countries, found that children with disabilities are more than twice as likely to experience violence as children without disabilities. Children with cognitive or learning disabilities face even higher rates. One in ten children with disabilities has experienced sexual violence. These are cases our students, our children.

A child with disabilities who is abused is less likely to be identified, and because of that, is likely to suffer longer. Research from the Department of Justice documents that at least 20 percent of child sex offenders have between 10 and 40 victims before they are caught. The harm does not start and stop with one child. It continues until someone finally has a way to see it.

I have worked with patients who were too scared to tell me until it was 2:00 in the am and they are sobbing uncontrollably while I must provide nursing care. I have worked with patients who need supervision for suicidal ideation because of the abuse they endured for years and went unreported. The honest answer, almost every time, is that no one had a way to know. There was no record. There was no witness. There was no mechanism that could see into the room where it was happening and say: this is wrong, and here is the proof.

That is what this bill creates. And I want to be clear about what it is and what it is not.

HB 1545 is an accountability process. It is not a prevention environment. A true prevention environment looks different. It looks like adequate staffing ratios. It looks like enough trained adults in every room so that no child is ever alone with one person and

no staff member is ever in a position where their word is the only word. It looks like the kind of investment in people that actually changes the conditions that make abuse possible in the first place.

I know that costs money. I know budgets are tight. I know that school systems across Maryland are navigating real fiscal pressure right now, and that the staffing investments we truly need are not something any of us can make appear overnight.

But here is what I also know. While we work through those budget constraints, while we advocate for the staffing and resources that would get us to a genuine prevention environment, children are in those classrooms today. Parents are sending their kids to school today, trusting that someone will be able to see what their child cannot say. We cannot ask those families to wait for a better budget year. We cannot tell them that the accountability structure will come once we have figured out everything else.

Cameras and audio recording are not the whole answer. But they are an answer we can give right now. They are a way of saying to parents whose children have no voice: someone is watching. There is a record. If something happens, there will be a way to know. That is not nothing. For the families who have already been through the experience of reporting something, being disbelieved, and watching nothing change, that accountability structure is everything.

Please pass HB 1545. And then let us keep working together on the rest.

Thank you.