

Testimony from Commissioner Ashley Esposito
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners
SB0554 Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners - Appointment Process – Alterations
3/30/26 | Ways & Means Committee
Position: Unfavorable

To the members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,
My name is Ashley Esposito. I am a proud resident of Maryland's 40th Legislative District, Baltimore City's first woman elected to the Board of School Commissioners, and a parent of a child currently enrolled in Baltimore City Public Schools. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony to this committee, and I do so with the utmost respect for this body and for the work each of you does on behalf of the people of Maryland.

I ask that you oppose SB0554.

I want to begin by offering the historical context that I believe is essential to understanding why this bill is so deeply concerning to those of us who have lived this process from the inside. Before I ran for election to the Board of School Commissioners, I was myself an applicant in the appointed process. Although I wasn't selected and later became an elected member, I watched the Community Panel interview applicants across multiple cycles. Through that experience, I came to understand what it genuinely takes to serve on a school board and to govern a major urban school district. That process shaped me. It prepared me. And it gave Baltimore City residents, including me at the time, a transparent and meaningful window into how candidates are vetted and how future Commissioners speak directly to the community about their qualifications and their commitment to serve. The community panel is important to our community voice.

In my first year alone as a Commissioner, I logged over 600 hours of service on behalf of Baltimore's students. I share that not to draw attention to myself, but to underscore the weight of this work. Commissioners oversee school policies, budgets, and student outcomes for a school system serving tens of thousands of children and their families across this city. The people entrusted with that responsibility must be vetted by those who are closest to the work and who fully understand what that responsibility demands. The Community Panel has been that mechanism, and eliminating it would deprive the public of one of its most important tools for holding this process accountable.

Now I want to speak to something that I feel has not been said clearly enough before this committee, and it is perhaps the most important point I will make today.

The board members who conducted our nationwide CEO search, who adopted our new governance framework, who worked with discipline and dedication to strengthen and transform this board, those are not abstract figures. I know them. I have sat beside them. I have watched them operate with integrity, with skill, and with an unwavering commitment to doing what is

best for the children of Baltimore City. And every single one of them was selected through the very process this bill seeks to eliminate.

Let that sink in for a moment. The Community Panel that this bill proposes to dismantle is the same panel that identified, vetted, and placed on this board the people who then did the hard, unglamorous, consequential work of reforming our governance, leading a rigorous national search, and moving this board in a stronger direction. You cannot simultaneously point to the board's recent progress as evidence that change is needed while also seeking to destroy the process that produced the people who made that progress possible. That contradiction deserves to be named clearly and directly before this committee.

I have witnessed these colleagues bring their full selves to this work. I have seen them ask the hard questions, make the difficult decisions, and remain grounded in what matters most, which is the education and well-being of tens of thousands of Baltimore City children. Their presence on this board is a testament to what the Community Panel process is capable of producing when it is allowed to function as it was designed. To dismantle that process now, in the wake of the very results it was built to deliver, would be a profound and unnecessary mistake.

I also want to respectfully draw this committee's attention to something that speaks directly to the confusion this bill has generated since its introduction. This bill has been amended multiple times. That pattern of amendment is not incidental. It reflects the fact that many who offered their early support did not have a full understanding of what this legislation actually contained before that support was sought and secured. That is a serious concern. When a bill requires repeated revision after introduction, and when supporters are later surprised by its details, this committee has every reason to pause and to ask whether the foundation on which this bill was built is solid enough to justify moving forward.

Regarding the integrity and accountability of the current board, which the bill's sponsor has raised, I want this committee to have the full picture. We conducted a nationwide search for our next chief executive. We strengthened our governance structure by adopting a comprehensive framework grounded in best practices. Our board leadership undertook a deliberate and thoughtful transformation. And again, I want to be unequivocal about this point. The board that did all of that work was selected by the Community Panel. The process being targeted by this bill is the very process that gave us the leadership capable of doing that work with excellence and integrity. The bill's sponsor was also an active participant in that CEO search process, which is precisely why the questions of timing and intent are not merely rhetorical before this committee. They are essential.

What is the timing of this bill? What is the true intent? And who in the broader community, beyond a single individual, is calling for this change?

At a recent board meeting, Community Panel members from organizations that have long served on the panel came forward to testify about the importance of preserving the community process. They asked Commissioners directly to voice their concerns about this bill. I am honoring that request today. Because the community showed up. They have shown up across multiple cycles, across many years, to affirm and improve this process. They have done so in good faith. And they deserve a committee that hears them with equal good faith.

I would also ask this committee to hold space for a voice that is too often spoken about but not always spoken with. Baltimore City students have been active, thoughtful, and remarkably engaged participants in this conversation. They have advocated for expanded Student Government Association membership. They have built the capacity of their Student General Assembly. They have shown up at every cycle of Commissioner selection with substantive questions and genuine insight into the needs of their peers and their schools. They have developed a robust election process for their own Student Commissioner, who serves on this board. As we deliberate over governance structures that will shape the education of an entire generation of young people, those young people deserve to have their voices present in the room, and this bill does not adequately account for that.

Visibility and community inclusion in the selection process have built real trust between Baltimore City residents and their school district over time. That trust was not given freely. It was earned through consistency, through transparency, and through the commitment of community members who believed that their participation mattered. This bill risks dismantling that trust in ways that will not be easy to rebuild. Chair Wilkins, I have the deepest respect for this committee's influence and judgment. I believe that the right path forward is one that strengthens community engagement, not one that narrows it. If there are ways to improve this process, I welcome that dialogue wholeheartedly. But improvement must come from genuine partnership with the community, not from legislation introduced before that community fully understood what was being proposed on their behalf.

I respectfully and strongly urge this committee to oppose SB0554. I encourage the bill's sponsor to engage directly with the Community Panel, to learn this process with humility and openness, and to work collaboratively with stakeholders, educators, parents, and students to identify improvements that are grounded in community voice and community trust. That is how we build governance that lasts. That is how we honor the children and families of Baltimore City. And that is the standard I know this committee is more than capable of upholding.

Thank you sincerely for your time, for your service, and for all that you do for the students and families of Maryland. I welcome any questions you may have.

Commissioner Ashley Esposito
Board of School Commissioners
Baltimore City Public Schools