

Testimony To The House Ways And Means Committee  
House Bill 140 — Election Law - Petitions And Ballot Questions -  
Plain Language Requirement

Testimony : Support With Amendment

January 29, 2020

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Good afternoon Chairman Kaiser and Committee. My name is Karleen Spitulnik and I am the mother of a teenager with dyslexia, an in-law of several adults with dyslexic and a member of Decoding Dyslexia Maryland, a grassroots organization representing the dyslexic community.

I am here to voice my support for HB 140. I believe that as a citizen, voting is a civic duty. But I also feel there is no reason to make voting difficult -- for anyone. This bill will make voting on ballot questions easier for everyone.

When I read HB140, I immediately thought of Question 1, the casino lockbox amendment on the 2018 ballot. The dense language in that amendment made it difficult to figure out what the amendment was about, much less how to vote. I counted 192 words in Question 1. The first sentence alone was 115 words and there were so many clauses, I struggled to identify the main subject and verb. If I had not been following the Maryland education funding discussions, I would not have understood the purpose of this constitutional amendment.

My oldest child is dyslexic and the 2026 election will be his first opportunity to vote. He has been fortunate to be taught to read using instruction that was explicit and systematic and encompassed all the components of reading. As a result he can read and comprehend pretty well, but he reads slowly, and depending on the complexity of what he is reading, he often needs to reread a text several times to comprehend it. Being a slow reader and avoiding reading is a major characteristic of most adults with dyslexia, and as a result, they have to work harder to read books and documents and ballots.

Requiring ballot questions to be written following The Federal Plain Language Guidelines will make voting on ballot questions easier. The guidelines suggest ways to make written language more concise and easier to understand. For example, they recommend using short to medium length sentences (averaging 20 words); keeping the subject and verb of a sentence close together; and using strong verbs.

Ballots that are easier to read would make all voters, including those with dyslexia, more inclined to vote the entire ballot. There is a time and a place for a reading test, but it shouldn't be the voting booth.

## **Question 1**

### **Constitutional Amendment (Ch. 357 of the 2018 Legislative Session)**

#### **Requiring Commercial Gaming Revenues that are for Public Education to Supplement Spending for Education in Public Schools**

The amendment requires the Governor to include in the annual State Budget, as supplemental funding for prekindergarten through grade 12 in public schools, the revenues from video lottery operation licenses and any other commercial gaming dedicated to public education in an amount above the level of State funding for education in public schools provided by the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act of 2002 (otherwise known as the Thornton legislation) in not less than the following amounts: \$125 million in fiscal year 2020; \$250 million in fiscal year 2021; \$375 million in fiscal year 2022; and 100% of commercial gaming revenues dedicated to public education in fiscal year 2023 and each fiscal year thereafter. The amendment also requires the Governor to show in the annual budget how the revenues from video lottery operation licenses and other commercial gaming are being used in a manner that is in addition to the level of State funding for public education provided by the funding formulas established by the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act. The State Constitution currently authorizes video lottery operation licenses for the primary purpose of raising money for public education.

(Amending Article XIX, Section 1(c)(1) and (g), and adding Section 1(f) to the Maryland Constitution)

Sentences: 3

Word Count: 192