



**HOUSE ECONOMIC MATTERS COMMITTEE**

**House Bill 97**

**Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion -**

**Established**

**January 26, 2021**

**Favorable Report**

Chair Davis, Vice Chair Dumais and members of the committee, my name is Nancy Shapiro. I am the Associate Vice Chancellor for Education and Outreach at the USM and Special Assistant to the Chancellor for P-20 Initiatives. I am offering testimony in support of House Bill 97 establishing an Office of Digital Inclusion.

When our public schools were forced to shift classes and assignments online due to the spread of the coronavirus, we confronted the reality that many students in Maryland do not have reliable access to internet at home—particularly those who live in rural areas and/or those from low-income households. According to a Pew Research Report written before the pandemic, the pivot to remote instruction greatly exacerbated the “homework gap” – which refers to school-age children lacking the connectivity they need to complete schoolwork at home.

Today, after ten months of pandemic isolation, all children are suffering learning gaps because of the disruption to their education, but students in rural settings, Black, Hispanic and low-income families are particularly disadvantaged without reliable internet connections (not to mention digital devices). These children are at the greatest risk for the greatest learning gaps and the greatest risk for long term consequences of those learning gaps.

Much of my work at USM revolves around ensuring that Maryland builds seamless pathways and robust pipelines from high school to college and workforce. I work closely with the educator preparation programs to ensure that USM programs are responsive to state needs for a highly qualified and diverse educator workforce. I work closely with the Maryland State Department of Education to support college and career ready standards. I am also responsible for overseeing the Maryland Center for Computing Education (MCCE), a collaboration between USM and MSDE to ensure that all districts have highly qualified teachers who can teach computer science and computational thinking.

Fulfilling Maryland's higher education mission is directly tied to the success of our public schools—and we define success operationally as measures of student achievement and attainment of students' goals, be it readiness for college or career. The University System of Maryland encompasses 12 public universities and three regional centers, and we recruit students from every county in the state. When we see a situation that directly affects student success, we are obligated to attend to it. Access to high-speed internet was on the periphery of our awareness for too long – the Covid crisis puts it front and center.

This legislation speaks directly to an urgent need for expanding access to internet across the state where it is most needed. Students cannot learn if they do not have equal access to education, and without high-speed internet access, many of our children will be left behind through no fault of their own.

The State has a responsibility to ensure equity of access to all students—this is a timely bill; the need has never been more obvious. I believe that internet should be considered like a public utility—it has become ubiquitous in commerce and now it is essential to educational equity. The establishment of the Office of Digital Inclusion is a first step. For these reasons, I strongly support House Bill 97.