

# BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**Testimony of the  
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners  
In Support of House Bill 97  
Department of Housing and Community Development -  
Office of Digital Inclusion - Established  
(Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)**

**January 26, 2021**

The Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners (the Board) supports House Bill 97 as the beginning steps to help bridge the digital divide that not only this State, but this country is, and has always been experiencing. The COVID-19 pandemic has only brought to light to everyone that not all residents have access to broadband service, especially in urban environments. The current Office of Rural Broadband established in 2017 only focuses on rural areas, however urban areas are clearly in need of connectivity.

When the pandemic started in the United States, schools were abruptly closed in March 2020. At that time, no one had any awareness that the closure would continue for such a long period of time. The Board began to develop a plan so that all of its students not only had devices to be able to access on line learning, but a plan to provide access to internet, which became difficult as it was clearly evident that across Baltimore City, there are varying degrees of homes that have access, can afford access or are able to consistently stay on the internet because of connectivity issues.

The Board spent approximately \$40 million on devices for the distribution to 55,000 students and staff. Last September, 2020, the Board approved an additional \$835,800 for Comcast to provide internet services for up to 7,000 students with internet connectivity from the Comcast Internet Essentials program. We have purchased hot spots through T-Mobil at a cost of \$7 million and constantly engaging and looking at other internet providers. We supported 45,000 students with 11,000 hotspots and access to internet. In total, the Board has approved approximately \$18 million for distance learning and academic supports. All of these expenses were not planned.

Despite having a school system that sits in the economic engine of the state, Baltimore City, we have families that cannot access reliable internet service, or have service that cannot support more than a few people on line at the same time. We also have thousands of families that cannot afford internet, as we have a large population of students living at or below the poverty line.

The access to broadband should not be this difficult. The internet should be considered a public utility and all homes should have access to reliable broadband. Not having access perpetuates educational inequality. Having students that can only access the internet if they are in a school building or go to a public library, or sit in a public building that gives free internet is not appropriate. Other locales in the State students can sit at home and easily access the internet. By providing reliable broadband internet service to all will help close one of the inequalities that currently exist in the delivery of instruction to students.

For the foregoing reasons, the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners supports House Bill 97 and urges a favorable report.

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