

**Written Testimony from Maryland School for the Deaf Faculty and Staff Association
AFT Local 4828**

**Submitted by Kristin Russell, member, AFT Local 4828
SB-556 Collective Bargaining – Staff – Maryland School for the Deaf
Before the Senate Finance Committee
February 25, 2021**

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Good afternoon madam Chair and members of the House Appropriations Committee. My name is Kristin “KC” Russell, and I am the Secretary of AFT Local 4828, the union for educational staff working at the Maryland School for Deaf. On behalf of the hundreds of public school educators working to teach Maryland’s students enrolled at our state’s School for the Deaf, I call for a favorable-with-amendments report on HB 837, the bill that would grant us the right to engage in collective bargaining, a right that every other public school teacher in the state has.

Hired as a licensed audiologist and certified teacher over thirty years ago, I was selected as MSD’s transition coordinator when related laws were passed in the early 1990s. By implementing COMAR required transition services, which are monitored by MSDE, a system was developed to provide “a coordinated set of educational, employment, transportation, and independent living activities to promote movement to post-school outcomes” for every student between the ages of 14 – 21. During the past 25 years, this student-centered system has grown to include a team of educational, employment, and transition personnel that collaborates with numerous businesses, agencies, training programs, and colleges to provide model services to MSD students.

As you know, MSD offers a unique and vibrant environment that provides each student with free access to ASL, their natural language. With the transition process dependent upon a variety of entities, MSD graduates must often navigate communication barriers with outside agency personnel. Such barriers are further compounded when parents or guardians do not use or understand their child’s primary language. In addition, serving students from across the state adds layers of complexity when accessible services span several counties or service regions. Accessing these resources often depends on providing specialized documentation to qualify for the funding needed for such support. This means that MSD staff must develop additional expertise to provide the assistance required to navigate the pathways our students design and follow to their graduation and beyond.

Members of the committee, it is an unfortunate truth that our educational staff are part of the very few public school educators that do not enjoy collective bargaining rights. Because of this, the Maryland School for the Deaf has been harmed. While I am proud of the work my colleagues and I do to educate the state’s hard-of-hearing children, we have lost a number of high-quality educators to other districts where the benefits and job protections are more solidified. Just by way of recent example, with the impending passage of Kirwan, which we enthusiastically support, educational staff at the school are unsure if the improvements proposed by that commission will be afforded to us, as many of the improvements proposed must be by law bargained collectively.

In addition, staff have been reluctant to speak publicly about issues at the school. There have been instances where management decisions regarding programming changes have materially affected the ability for our students to qualify for services after graduation. For fear of being retaliated against, and because of a lack of a voice in the conditions of our employment, some faculty, far too often, feel the pressure to not “rock the boat.” Passage of this bill will go a long way towards seeing that our school—which provides vital educational services to Maryland’s deaf and hard-of-hearing students—will no longer be treated differently than any other public school in the state.

The amendments we are proposing would clarify who is eligible for collective bargaining at the school, making the process available to teachers, specialists, and other non-supervisory staff at the school. Employees who do these jobs at schools in local county school districts have unionization rights, and the amendment we are proposing would bring the Maryland School for the Deaf in line with those school systems.

Again, I urge a favorable report for SB 556. Thank you.