

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

**Submitted by Nidhi Joseph, Elementary School Teacher, Maryland School for the Deaf
SB 556 - Collective Bargaining –Maryland School for the Deaf – Separate Bargaining Unit
Before the Senate Finance Committee
February 25th, 2021**

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Nidhi Joseph, and I am a Second Grade Teacher at the Maryland School for the Deaf, Columbia Campus. Along with 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 SB 556, 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.

I have taught in the Elementary School Department for the past 3 years. I have worked with a diverse group of students in this period. 95% of all deaf and hard of hearing students are born to hearing parents. Only a small fraction of these parents learn and use ASL with their child. As a result, the majority of my students have experienced language deprivation and have severe language delays. Some students have additional learning disabilities, and/or developmental conditions of which deafness is a part. In my instruction, I follow the Maryland College and Career-Ready Standards but also develop remedial and enrichment activities to meet each individual student where they are. Doing this requires a strong knowledge of pedagogy and childhood development, countless hours of creating material to support student learning and coordinated collaboration with several other staff members.

I love working with my students and am proud to work at a school that has so many dedicated and talented staff members. Yet, I have seen several key specialist positions remain unfilled and students who desperately need support with their reading and ASL skills go without these essential services. I have seen a number of highly qualified colleagues leave the institution because they are frustrated by the way decisions are made. With such a high turn-over rate, there is a constant flux in policies and programs, which leaves teachers needing to redesign and adapt materials for their individual students, learn to use new programs and work out kinks. This does not make for a smooth or stable learning environment. I question if this is the right environment to foster student learning, and for me to grow as an educator, and I have no say in decisions which directly impact me and my very unique students. As someone who primarily works with students and their families, I feel it is important to have a voice in the decision-making process.

Currently, our classroom and other non-supervisory staff do not work under the protections of a collectively bargained union contract. With this bill, we hope to correct that mistake. 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 proposed amendments 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.