



**Testimony in Support of House Bill 155 (Delegate Wilkins)
County Boards and Public and Nonpublic Prekindergarten Programs
and Schools - Discrimination – Prohibition
(Inclusive Schools Act)**

January 27, 2021

Dear Chairwoman Kaiser and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

On behalf of Strong Future Maryland, we write in strong support of House Bill 155. Strong Future Maryland works to advance bold, progressive policy changes to address systemic inequality and promote a sustainable, just, and prosperous economic future for all Marylanders. We urge you to support this legislation to provide civil rights protections and an administrative relief process for students in our public schools and schools receiving public funding.

This legislation, which has passed the House twice, is necessary to provide support for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. HB155 provides a much needed mechanism for students to file an administrative complaint and seek relief if they believe they have been discriminated against in their publicly funded school. It is not enough for our laws to merely state that students are protected, we must establish an accessible process by which students can avail themselves of their rights and advocate for themselves. Under the current system, the only real mechanism for students to seek relief or file a complaint is to file a lawsuit. The administrative procedure established in HB155 would provide students with a process accessible to all students regardless of income, and allows for the State Board of Education to serve as a mediator rather than forcing students and school districts into court.

While this legislation establishes an administrative process for any member of a protected class to seek relief, it is of particular importance to LGBTQ students. Despite strong efforts on behalf of the State Board of Education to assist local school boards with establishing written policies to support LGBTQ students, only a few school districts have proactively taken steps to adopt such policies. LGBTQ students deserve safe and affirming learning environments, and it is the duty of the state and our schools to not only provide this safe environment, but to ensure that the established policy of the State Board of Education is being upheld.

In addition to supporting students, HB155 also provides much needed guidance to school districts, school administrators and educators. It establishes a mediation process that allows for administrative remedies and relief rather than legal proceedings. Lastly, it ensures that non-discrimination protections are equally enforced across the state. A student's civil rights should

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not be dependent on what school district or school they attend. All students deserve the same level of protection whether they attend school in Talbot County or Frederick County. Strong Future Maryland urges the committee to vote favorably on House Bill 155.

John B. King Jr.

Alice Wilkerson

Founder and Board Chair

Executive Director