



To: Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee

CC: MD State Legislature

From: Howard County Autism Society
Pathfinders for Autism

Date: February 15, 2022

Subject: HCAS Support of SB0577- Public Schools – Self-Contained Special Education Classroom – Use of Video Recording Devices

To Members of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee:

On behalf of the Howard County Autism Society and Pathfinders for Autism, we are collectively submitting this testimony today to express our strong support for SB577 - Public Schools – Self-Contained Special Education Classroom – Use of Video Recording Devices submitted by Senator Klausmeier, with a companion bill, HB226, submitted by Delegates Guyton and Luedtke.

Although we were disappointed that bill did not move forward in 2019 or 2020, we are grateful it is moving ahead again this year in support of our most vulnerable residents. Hopefully, the third time will be the charm for this important effort.

The number of stories continue to grow each year of camera footage capturing abuse of children in our schools. Yet, for every one of these instances, there are many more reported or suspected cases of abuse that could be confirmed or refuted if there was a systematic way to capture video evidence in the matter. We are all acutely aware of the ruling by the Department of Justice right here in our own state when staff from Frederick County Public Schools illegally restrained students with disabilities. Our non-speaking children - with Autism or other disabilities - could never have shared with their family and loved ones that they had been harmed. But a camera may have captured and possibly prevented those incidents. Several other states, including our neighbor, West Virginia, have heeded the message and implemented similar legislation in an effort to protect our students.

Children in Special Education classrooms are especially vulnerable to abuse because they often lack the ability to fully communicate any concerns adequately, creating the potential for egregious and continuing victimization. This bill is designed to provide recordings in self-

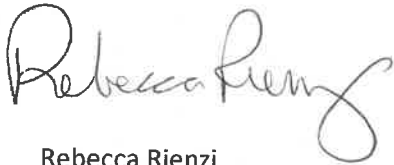
contained special education classrooms where these children may be isolated with limited staff and students, and has the potential to significantly reduce abuse, neglect, bullying, harassment or other behaviors/violations against our children who may not be able to fully advocate for their own safety and well-being. We must do better to protect this vulnerable population of students and continue to provide quality instruction in a safe environment conducive to learning. Although a bit more limited than last year, this bill still provides a much-needed step towards that end.

We also believe that this bill as written addresses any potential concerns about the use of the cameras for monitoring teachers and it sets forth clear guidelines for viewing the recordings. In our opinion, this balanced bill provides much needed protections to our most vulnerable children and does not endanger the privacy of the children or staff. To that end, we recommend that implementation of this important protection be done with sufficient planning to provide consistency across the state. It is imperative that the school systems, staff, and parents can be confident that this key initiative is installed with rigor and efficacy and with proper safeguards.

Thank you in advance for your strong consideration in supporting this bill for the protection of our community. We must make this a reality for the benefit of our school staff, our families, and, most importantly, our children that may not be able to advocate or protect themselves.

We once again would like to thank Ms. Lori Scott for her work in advocating for this bill, Delegate Guyton and Senator Klausmeier for sponsoring this bill on the floor. Your efforts on behalf of our community are very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,



Rebecca Rienzi
Executive Director
Pathfinders for Autism
rrienzi@pathfindersforautism.org
443-330-5370 x 101



Melissa Rosenberg
Executive Director
Howard County Autism Society
melissa.rosenberg@howard-autism.org
410-290-3466