

ORAL TESTIMONY

BILL: SB - 519 - Education - Student Organized Peaceful Demonstrations - Student Discipline and Policy

SPONSOR: Senator Washington, *Baltimore City*

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

FROM: Christian Thomas, District 6
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SB 519: Favorable

Good afternoon Chair Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and honorable members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:

My name is Christian Thomas, the 41st Student Member of the Baltimore County Public Schools Board of Education. I am here today speaking as an individual, and not on behalf of the Board, to implore this committee to submit a favorable report for SB0519.

The first-amendment right to peacefully assemble has been the cornerstone of political movements and the catalyst for action that has driven our country to change, with youth playing no small part. However, in our country’s history, and this state’s, that right has not always been equally guaranteed to students.

I have seen it in place with some incredible student movements in Baltimore County. From a peaceful demonstration in my own school, Eastern Tech, a year before I arrived, where students gathered in the cafeteria in solidarity against acts of racism from students on social media, to students at Patapsco High School who, earlier this year, crafted eloquent speeches in their writing programs and gave them during a walk-out that focused on demanding their administration to continue incorporating advising and student breaks during the school day.

But, I’ve also witnessed students being silenced and prevented from organizing, like one administration who, earlier this year, threatened to remove a student from their role as student government vice president if she followed through with plans to organize a demonstration protesting the dress code policy that she deemed to be “sexist”. Or as I sat in a middle school

classroom where teachers threatened to refuse to allow students to make-up work if they joined their peers in the auditorium demanding an end to gun violence in schools.

In BCPS, our student handbook reads: “Students’ right to assemble is subject to school authorities setting reasonable limits regarding the time, place, and way students may assemble.” But, our unanswered question is, what constitutes a limit as “reasonable”? Is it threatening to remove a student from their leadership roles if they were to be involved, if they were to stand up against dress code policies that they feel unequally target their gender over another? Is it refusing to allow a middle school student to make-up assignments if they wish to stand up against mass school shootings across our country, is that a reasonable limit? If we can’t protest the decisions of our school systems then how are we, as students, to even be engaged?

We need a law allowing us to demonstrate peacefully. We need our school systems to hear this message. We need our legislators to stand behind the very ideals of our democracy. And, we need SB0519 to pass so that our students’ voices are not stifled, but rather uplifted.

Committee members, I am urging you to support this bill. The 111,000+ students I represent deserve this bill, they shouldn’t have to fear consequences for taking a stance or standing up for what they believe.

Thank you,
Christian Thomas