

TESTIMONY

BILL: SB116 - Public Schools - Inclusive and Diverse English Language Arts -
Development of Content Standards and Implementation

SPONSOR: Senator Ellis, Charles County

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

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**Submitted in Association with the Maryland Student Coalition*
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SB116: Favorable

Chair Pinsky, and honorable members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee. Today, I am writing in favor of SB 116.

The diversity in curriculum which SB 116 advocates for is not only desirable but necessary. By increasing the authorial diversity of required texts for English Language Arts classes, in turn both representation and inclusivity are affected. The diversification of required texts to include those written by people of color, marginalized gender identities, LGBT people, disabled people and more, students who similarly identify with these groups see a path forward in a world that is not necessarily made for them. But more than just being able to relate to minority authors, these identities are often reflected in the characters and themes of the literature written. Finally, disabled students will get to read a book with a disabled hero; students of color can read a book where someone they can identify with is a CEO; and the list goes on. The diversification of literature not only creates a learning environment that fosters the dreams and aspirations of the many instead of the few, but also allows students of all backgrounds who *don't* identify with authors or characters to broaden their world view and understanding. It has been shown that consistent exposure through literature to characters unlike yourself increases empathy and decreases discriminatory tendencies. In these ways, the diversification of literature must be seen not only as a priority but as a necessity by the state of Maryland.

As a former Baltimore County Public Schools student for thirteen years, I have a commanding understanding on the state of representation in ELA curriculum that can generally be extrapolated across counties bar few. And the state of representation is very poor indeed. Having taken the highest-level English courses offered to me throughout my educational career, I only ever encountered 2 female

authors, 1 Jewish author, 1 Black author, and 1 Hispanic author of substantial required texts. The remainder of required texts I read—and also the vast majority—were written by straight, white men. As a person of color who identifies as gay, I never in my thirteen years of schooling encountered an author or character who I could relate to as a gay man or racial minority. I am unable to speak to whether or not this representation would have made me feel more comfortable in my own skin, but I can say that for me, and many people of color, and many members of the LGBTQ+ community, coming to terms with your identity in predominantly straight or white institutions was a challenge. By diversifying literature from middle school onwards, we as a state can take the crucial and revolutionary steps to cultivating an educational environment that is inclusive not only in name but in practice. Moreover, it is the responsibility of this body and of the state of Maryland to strive for such an environment irrespective of political agenda or affiliation—a responsibility that must be realized.

For the reasons stated above, I urge the committee to issue a **favorable** report on SB 116.