

Testimony from the Associated Student Congress of Baltimore City (ASCBC)
HB443 - Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners – Alterations

Before the House Ways and Means Committee

Thursday, February 10, 2022

Position: FAVORABLE WITHOUT AMENDMENTS

May it please this Committee — the Associated Student Congress of Baltimore City has written and subsequently submitted lengthy testimony in favor of the passage of HB 433 and the institution of two fully elected Student Commissioners on the Baltimore School Board with complete and comprehensive voting rights.

As Thomas Jefferson famously quipped, “democracy will cease to exist when you take away from those who are willing to work and give to those who would not.” The rationale employed by this legislation and its proponents is both evident and sound. In the absence of Student Commissioners who are both directly accountable to the Student Body affected by policies the School Board institutes and able to enact the Student Body’s wishes into enduring practice, the Student Body cannot be presumed to have meaningful representation at all.

Let us be clear — unelected Student Commissioners anointed in back rooms are not in any way, shape, or form a voice for students on North Avenue. They are a mouthpiece; a token that allows the School Board to manufacture consent from students without any such consent existing. The ASCBC and the other SGAs throughout the city responsible for executing this tired ritual every year must accept that harsh truth. Students do not and will not have the fair voice to which they are entitled on North Avenue until they are elected by students to vote on behalf of students.

North Avenue has, expectedly, submitted Amendments to this Committee which aim to water down the contents of the bill and assault the very core purpose of these reforms. This is not and ought not to be surprising. The current system, lucrative as it is, provides them with the ability to ignore issues and interests put forward by students and continue to exclude us from decision-making, the effects of which we bear the brunt of.

Expanding the number of SGAs privy to the process of selecting the Student Commissioner is, as laudable as it may be within the confines of the current system, wholly inadequate and in fact insulting to the goals of reform. The proposal to expand the compensation workgroup on the policy bodies at North Avenue is, while an equally positive step in the right direction, a disingenuous attempt at compromising a position which should, given the potential for enduring, positive change, need no accommodation.

Moreover, there is no indication that the Amendment as written will be of benefit to students watching this process in Annapolis closely. Should the Mayor be awarded the opportunity to appoint more members to the compensation workgroup, such Amendments should provide for the guarantee of those positions to students, and they should play a supporting role in this legislation rather than a distraction from the reforms as proposed.

If the last years' events have shown anything, with the dismal failure of municipal COVID procedures, the lack of transparency surrounding school closures as a result of positive infections, the explosive allegations brought against school and district administration on protocol surrounding bullying, harrasment, and sexual assault, and others, it is that students cannot productively proceed in our studies without at least basic confidence that our authorities are hearing and seeing our concerns. At present, they are not.

Meaningful student cooperation with and contribution to the systems of education authority are tangible and possible. We need only look to our neighbors next door in Baltimore County, whose Student Commissioner, Christian Thomas, has opened up Board Committees, passed meaningful policy in Parkville, and inspired a new generation of hardworking student leaders seeking to be his successor in next month's election. The same can happen here in Baltimore City, and, if Annapolis only directs North Avenue to work with us in good faith, students can and will rise to the occasion of the opportunity to represent ourselves and our communities for the betterment of parents, teachers, students, and the City.

It is for each of the above reasons that we once again reiterate the position we signaled to the Baltimore City Senate Delegation, the one we have signaled on social media, and the one we have signaled in public press comments made alongside students, teachers, and parents. Annapolis must intervene to prevent further estrangement between student and municipal leaders and provide for elected, voting Student Commissioners to deepen student trust in North Avenue and the systems that inform our protocols and policies.

We ask that the House Ways and Means Committee advance HB 433 as written and reject the bad-faith Amendments submitted by North Avenue. Thank you for your time.

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