

**Testimony in Opposition of Senate Bill 908 Harford County Board of Education –
Appointment of Members –
Alterations Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs**

Jansen M. Robinson

My name is Jansen M. Robinson and I am currently serving in the last year of my second four year term, on the Harford County Board of Education (BoE), representing District “A”, (Edgewood/Joppatowne Communities). I am also the recent past president of the Board. I am writing this letter to ask that the Maryland General Assembly and/or its committees and/or sub-committees to not give favorable consideration to any changes to current law as it relates to the composition process or the manner in which the Board chooses to conducts its’ business meetings.

Full disclosure, I initially supported and actively advocated for a fully elected school board, even in light of opposition from many in the African American community to include, the Harford County Chapter of the NAACP (of which I was a member).

My rationale for doing so at the time, was that appointments to the Board was based on nominations from Nominating Committee (Special Interest Groups), and some of those who were nominated did not even live in the communities that they represented on the BoE. I believed then and now, that each community should decide who represents them on the BoE.

As an example, at the time of my advocacy for an elected Board, the Edgewood representative actually lived in Abingdon. And although his children were zoned for schools in Edgewood, he had no other connections with the community. I did not think he could effectively advocate for a community in which he did not reside.

As you are aware, the Maryland General Assembly passed HB 639 and Senate Bill 629 that established a blended board, with one (1) member to be elected from each of the six (6) council districts and three (3) members would be appointed by the governor from applicants from the community.

While this was not what I had hoped for, I believed that it was a good compromise. So I ran for, but lost election to the first iteration of the blended board. I then applied for one of the appointed positions and was invited to participate in the vetting process by the governors’ office. Although I was not selected, I was impressed with the vetting and selection process.

I was subsequently elected and reelected to the Harford County BoE, and have even served as its’ most recent past President. It is my belief that regular people like myself, would not have had this opportunity had the former selection process remained in place.

In addition, communities like the one that I represent, probably would have continued to be represented on the board by someone nominated by one of the special interest groups.

My fear is that approval of this bill could have the effect of opening this process up to political patronage, and other political shenanigans by special interest groups much like what we are witnessing in other communities. Last, but certainly not least, one of the senators sponsoring SB 908 is also running for Harford County Executive.

I share this with you because I need to you know that I have intimate knowledge of the process as well as experience of having served on blended boards with Members appointed by the governor. The advantages of our blended board far exceeds the any advantages of a fully elected Board at this time. One of which is that over the past three iterations of the blended board, each time the governor has made appointments that took into account the racial makeup of the Board and the community. And I can attest to the independent nature of the decisions made by the appointees serving during my tenure on the BoE.

This is important because of the dozen or so Harford County department heads at the Director/Assistant Director Level, there has only been one who was a person of color since the 1990's (during a Democratic Administration).

Currently of the two dozen or so Department Directors and Assistant Directors, there is only one (1) Assistant Department head, who is a person of color. Both Director and Assistant Director positions are selected by the County Executive and approved by the County Council- the same officials that the Harford County Delegation want to make appointments to the BoE. County leaders have given the African American community no reason to believe that they would do anything differently when selecting/approving school board member(s).

If the goal is to make the BoE more accountable to the public, then I would suggest that the Maryland General Assembly remove term limits. While I initially thought term limits to be a good idea, I find that term limits take away the ability for the voters to decide who should represent them on the BoE; and with term limits in place, the Board loses institutional knowledge, leading to a steep and time consuming learning curve for newly elected/ appointed members.

So again, I am **OPPOSED to SB: 908** and I ask that the Maryland General Assembly not give favorable consideration to this Bill. I urge you to maintain the current BoE laws, at least until our community and the State has had a chance to adjust to life altered by the pandemic.

If you desire any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me @ Jansen.robinson@hcps.org; or Jansen.robinson@hotmail.com (410) 676-1589 or 410-258-4552.