

**Testimony from Corey Gaber, Baltimore Teachers Union Vice President, District
40 Resident**

HB433- Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners – Alterations

Before the Baltimore City Senate Delegation

2/10/22

Position: FAVORABLE with amendments

Good morning members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Corey Gaber and I'm a District 40 resident and a Vice President on the Baltimore Teachers Union Executive Board. The Baltimore Teachers Union represents over 7,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school related personnel. BTU supports HB433 to increase the amount of student members of the Baltimore City Schools Board of Commissioners from one to two, to give those student members full voting rights and the ability to participate in closed/executive sessions, to alter the process by which those students are chosen to be more democratic, and to establish a commission to research and make recommendations on board member compensation.

I have personally spoken with the past three student commissioners (Kyree Sykes, Joshua Lynn, Ashley Peña), and all of them felt at times like second class citizens and tokens in service of other adults' agendas. The ability to participate in the policy committee is great, and also insufficient. It's time we live up to our lofty rhetoric about how amazing our young people are by actually empowering them with the same voting rights as every other board member. They have access to the same presentations and information from City Schools staff as everyone else, and can lean on board staff to answer questions and prepare them as well. In cases of a conflict of interest, they can check with legal counsel if they are too close to a personnel issue and recuse themselves from that vote just like any other board member.

One of the things that these SMOBs, and former student commissioner in Anne Arundel County's Drake Smith mentioned was the need to have a peer they could confide in, someone also on the board who saw things from their vantage point. We know that when you are in a space as the only person with a particular identity, it is challenging to have a fully expressed voice. Adding a second seat can both help to ensure students are prepared to vote with guidance from a fellow student member, and leave space for students who are in non-traditional situations such as students experiencing homelessness, students who are immigrants or ESL, and students with disabilities to represent their peers as well. If we truly value our youth, then it's time we empower them to be full participants on the board.

Serving on the school board is the equivalent of taking on an unpaid, part-time job. Regular meetings, often during the working day, are challenging for many workers or individuals with young children. The volunteer-like nature of being an uncompensated school board member limits the candidate pool to those with the unfair advantage of flexible schedules and more resources. People should be fairly compensated for their time and the opportunity to serve

should be accessible to all people, especially parents or guardians of City Schools students. This bill establishes a task force to study what compensation makes the most sense and to submit recommendations.

As a middle school teacher who incorporates civics into the curriculum wherever possible, I'm particularly excited about shifting the election process from the narrow pool of Associated Student Congress of Baltimore City (ASCBC) leadership to one where EVERY City Schools student from grades 6-12 can weigh in on their elected representatives. It provides a rare authentic opportunity to talk about civic engagement not in an abstract sense, but in a direct experiential way with real consequences. This will connect students at a young age with policy and educate them about their own opportunities for leadership in student government associations and the board. It has been suggested that we should allow the school board to work with ASCBC to improve the current election process. We applaud those efforts, the board can and should analyze why there aren't as many SGAs in our high schools and how to increase access and equity in those processes. At the same time, this is no substitute for allowing ALL 6-12 students to participate in choosing their representative on the board as other counties do. Even the leadership of ASCBC supports this bill including the revised election process, which still allows for the board and ASCBC to weigh in on the specifics procedures and set up of said election.

One amendment that would improve this bill is removing the delegate convention intermediary step of the student member of the board election process. Asking schools to hold separate elections just to appoint delegates to a convention to narrow the field of candidates would be logistically complex and create an undue burden on staff whose time is already stretched to the breaking point. By moving straight to the general vote for all eligible candidates we would not only remove this burden but end up with a more direct democratic process that still offers a valuable opportunity for real life civics education and engagement.

Finally I'd like to emphasize as an organizational member of the VOTES (**V**oices **T**owards and **E**lected **S**chool Board) Coalition, this bill is already a significant compromise. We met with members of the school board and the mayor's office over the summer in good faith discussions after pulling last session's bill that would have more dramatically restructured the school board. Their concerns and ideas were incorporated into this legislation to ensure that we can move towards a more democratic, transparent, youth centric and effective board.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Delegation to issue a favorable report on HB433. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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