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Testimony in Support of House Bill 153/Senate Bill 31
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners - Student Members and Task Force to Study
Compensation and Student Members

House Ways and Means Committee
February 1, 2023
1:00pm

The Baltimore Teachers Union supports House Bill 153/Senate Bill 31, which would establish that the Student Member of the Board of School Commissioners is elected by all students in secondary school in Baltimore City, and expand the topics that the Student Member of the Board (SMOB) is allowed to vote on, as well as establishing a task force to study compensation for the Baltimore City School Board Commissioners and the possibility of adding a second student member to the Board.

The Baltimore Teachers Union represents 8,280 teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, clinicians, librarians, secretaries, community school site specialists, bus transportation aides, and many more school-based and central office support staff. We are 4 out of 5 workers in Baltimore City Public Schools, serving 75,595 students and their families. Our national union, the American Federation of Teachers, has over 1.7 million members in the United States and its territories.

The Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners is the governing body overseeing Baltimore City Public Schools. The Board of School Commissioners is charged with approving the annual budget, hiring, evaluating and terminating the district CEO, negotiating the district's collective bargaining agreements, opening and closing schools, setting priorities for school improvement, and setting the school district's policies. The board is made up of nine members appointed by the Mayor, with the input of a community panel, two commissioners elected by the city's voters in an at-large election, and a student commissioner, currently chosen by the Associated Student Congress of Baltimore City.

House Bill 153/Senate Bill 31 seeks to expand the SMOB's voting rights to topics previously restricted, including the capital and operating budgets, school closings, reopenings, and boundaries, and student disciplinary matters. We support expanded student voting rights as a recognition that students who are directly impacted by all aspects of board governance deserve a say in how money is spent, and how school resources are distributed to promote student success.

We further believe that a voting process for the SMOB involving many more students is a much needed improvement. The current process limits the selection of the SMOB to students who are elected representatives of their school's Student Government Association (SGA), and a direct election provides a simpler mechanism for more students to get involved in the decision making process.

House Bill 153/Senate Bill 31 additionally calls for a task force to study adding an additional student member to the board and to make recommendations regarding the amount and source of proposed compensation for commissioners. Adding another student member to the board is an important step in ensuring that youth voices are heard meaningfully, rather than tokenized. An additional student commissioner could provide more support and collaboration opportunities to the current SMOB, and provide a broader and more diverse set of experiences and representation which can help the board reach decisions more equitably.

Diverse representation on School Boards is critical to governing schools that serve a diverse student population. At present, Baltimore City is the only jurisdiction in the state that does not compensate its School Board Commissioners for the countless hours of work for which they are responsible. Taking on a time-consuming volunteer position is financially prohibitive for many Baltimore citizens whose talent and perspective would be uniquely valuable to the Board. A compensation study is an important step towards equity and inclusion.

The challenges of Baltimore City Public Schools can only be overcome when they are addressed democratically, collectively and collaboratively. The steps outlined in House Bill 153/Senate Bill 31 reflect years of collaboration and compromise.

BTU urges a favorable report on House Bill 153/Senate Bill 31.