



Maryland Youth Advisory Council  
c/o Governor's Office of Crime  
Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services  
100 Community Place,  
Crownsville, MD 21032

Grace Minakowski, *Chair*  
Will O'Donnell, *Vice-Chair*  
Folashade Epebinu, *Secretary*

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February 6, 2024

**Re: HB 373** | Election Law - Voting Age - Board of Education Elections

Dear Chair Atterbeary and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

The Maryland Youth Advisory Council prides itself on being a coalition of diverse young advocates and leaders who serve as a voice for youth in the state of Maryland. As leaders in our communities, and as appointees of the Governor, President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, Maryland Association of Student Councils, Maryland Higher Education Commission and the University System of Maryland, we take every opportunity to address relevant issues by influencing legislation, spreading public awareness and serving as a liaison between youth and policymakers regarding issues facing youth.

**HB 373** proposes a constitutional amendment which gives Maryland counties the authority to lower the voting age to 16 year olds for county board of education elections, and said amendment will be voted on via ballot initiative.

In 1971, the 26th Amendment to the US Constitution was passed, lowering the voting age from age 21 to 18, responding to the reality that young men in the United States could be drafted to serve in the military but not vote for their elected leaders.<sup>1</sup> Yet, 53 years later, we fail to expand this notion of political representation to those under 18. Students are affected by the choices made by their respective boards of education every day. From transportation to funding to course requirements and curriculum, *we the students*, are the stakeholders best equipped to articulate problems facing our school system. 16-17 year olds can drive. 16-17 year olds can be (and are often) tried as adults in criminal trials. 16-17 years old are educated on contemporary social and political issues. One analysis found that those under 18 scored higher than those ages 18-80 on civics/government curriculum questions by significant margins, such as “name the Vice President” and “describe *Judicial Review*”.<sup>2</sup> In 15 US states including Maryland, 17 year olds who will be 18 by the time of the general election can vote in Congressional, Gubernatorial, and Presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> In Maryland, all students are required to take a government class to graduate. Still, it seems a stretch to our legislators that young people should have the right to elect their school board members.

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<sup>1</sup> NYRA. (2023, April 20). *Voting Age: Facts and Resources - NYRA*. NYRA - Live Free, Start Young. <https://www.youthrights.org/issues/voting-age/facts-and-resources/>

<sup>2</sup> We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution: Survey Results: 2009 National Finalists' Knowledge and Support of American Democratic Institutions and Processes. (2009). *Center for Civic Education (Center)*.

<sup>3</sup> FairVote. (2023, April 26). *Why should we lower the voting age to 16? - FairVote*. [https://fairvote.org/archives/why\\_should\\_we\\_lower\\_the\\_voting\\_age\\_to\\_16/](https://fairvote.org/archives/why_should_we_lower_the_voting_age_to_16/)

The case against teen voting is built on three inaccurate assumptions, 1.) teens lack the knowledge to make an informed vote; 2.) teens are apathetic and don't participate in elections, and 3.) teen voting has a negative impact on election outcomes. To combat these myths, a study published by the American Academy of Political and Social Science found that, based on core qualities of citizenship as defined by membership, concern for rights, and participation in society, 16-17 year olds were indistinguishable from 18 years olds in their ability to function as citizens and exercise their right to vote.<sup>4</sup> As defined by the Federal Voting Rights Act, "any person who has not been adjudged an incompetent and who has completed *the sixth grade* in a public school in, or a private school accredited by, any State or territory, the District of Columbia, or the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico where instruction is carried on predominantly in the English language, possesses sufficient literacy, comprehension, and intelligence to vote in any election."

Second, young people *do* turnout in elections and care about political participation. Right here in Maryland, Takoma Park, Rockville, Somerset, and Chevy Chase have passed charter amendments to allow 16-17 year olds to vote in local elections. In the first year of elections after the amendment in Takoma Park, 44% of 16-17 year olds registered turned out compared to an overall turnout rate of 10%.<sup>5</sup> Young people have often been the deciding factor in elections at the local, state, and national level, and they force candidates to turn more attention to issues disproportionately affecting youth.

Finally, expanding the demographic of young voters encourages civic participation at large. One poll found that, among young voters, 50% tried to convince other youth to vote, 16% attended marches or campaign rallies, 8% donated money, and 11% helped register others to vote.<sup>6</sup> Studies of the brain find that voting at a young age becomes a habit, improving voter turnout later in life. Young people that vote are also more likely to have parents who vote, attain higher education degrees, and even experience longer life expectancies.<sup>7</sup>

**HB 373** balances the autonomy of counties and the right of Maryland citizens to participate directly in the democratic process. The Council has voted in favor of endorsing **HB 373**, as it aligns with the Council's Legislative Platform supporting:

- a. Youth involvement in the creation and revision of legislation impacting youth (Article I, Clause E) as accomplished through the election of adult leaders
- b. Opportunities for youth to be a part of community and statewide decisions (Article I, Clause F), including through political participation and voting.

**HB 373** moves to protect the civic rights of young Marylanders and ensure our voices are equally valued in the legislative process. As demonstrated by bodies like the Maryland Youth Advisory Council, young

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<sup>4</sup> Hart, D., & Atkins, R. (2010). American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote. *American Academy of Social and Political Science*, 633(1), 201–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716210382395>

<sup>5</sup> Lowering The Voting Age For Local Elections In Takoma Park And Hyattsville, MD. (2015). *Generation Citizen*. <https://vote16usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Final-MD-Case-Study.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *Broadening youth voting*. (n.d.). CIRCLE. <https://circle.tufts.edu/our-research/broadening-youth-voting>

<sup>7</sup> *Expanding Voting Rights to Adolescents: Views from a Developmental Scientist | Equity Alliance*. (n.d.-b). <https://equityalliance.stanford.edu/content/expanding-voting-rights-adolescents-views-developmental-scientist>

people are not apathetic to the decisions made by our adult leaders and have adequate knowledge to participate politically. By allowing 16-17 year olds to vote in board of education elections, the Maryland General Assembly has the opportunity to shift the focus of adult leaders to their young constituents, a demographic which has long been ignored on the basis of age. For these reasons, the Council supports **HB 373** and respectfully requests a favorable report from the committee. We thank you for your consideration of our position.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Minakowski', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Grace Minakowski, Chair  
Maryland Youth Advisory Council