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County Council of Howard County, Maryland
Bill No. 36-2016
Act to Establish a Commission for Transitioning Students with Disabilities
June 20, 2016

Position: SUPPORT

The Howard County Transition Council for Youth with Disabilities strongly supports Bill No. 36-2016, which would establish a permanent county commission for transitioning students with disabilities.

Chairman Ball, respected County Council members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening about the importance of this legislation. By way of background, I am a longtime advocate for individuals with disabilities and their families, having entered the world of autism 15 years ago when my son was diagnosed with the developmental disability. I served for many years as president and board member of the Howard County Autism Society, and have been appointed to many workgroups within the Howard County Public School System. I am passionate about improving services for students with disabilities and am proud to promote the work of the county in supporting families. Professionally I am associate director of the Hussman Foundation, a foundation well known for its generous support of inclusive practices in our schools. I currently serve as co-chair of the Howard County Transition Council for Youth with Disabilities alongside Mr. Dawson Robertson, transition program head for the school system.

Many families of children with disabilities face great uncertainty when they plan for their child's future. While that is not much different from typical families, families with special needs

often require greater coordination to prepare children for college, employment, and participation in the community.

We are most grateful for Executive Kittleman's commitment to support students with disabilities through this proposed legislation. In 2013, Executive Ulman created the Howard County Transition Council for Youth with Disabilities through an executive order. The charge was to develop and implement strategic recommendations to improve post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Our focus was students ages 14 to 21, and their transition as young adults from high school to life after high school. Since then, the executive order has been renewed twice, recommendations have been implemented, and the work has continually expanded as national and state efforts highlight the importance of preparing these transitioning youth.

With your support, a standing county commission will elevate our efforts to bring stakeholders together to address concerns facing transitioning youth with disabilities and their families, and to create a roadmap for improvements in the transition process.

The Commission will include family members, students with disabilities, educators, transition specialists, agencies serving people with disabilities, state and local government officials, and business leaders. Together, we will develop thoughtful, purposeful steps to successfully transition students with disabilities.

In its work thus far, the Howard County Transition Council for Youth with Disabilities has made several improvements to the transition process during students' final years in high school. **The Commission will look to expand its focus on transition beginning at the age of 14, as is required by law (under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and COMAR), to ensure that students are better equipped for living and participating in their community, attending college if desired, and working in paid positions.**

The Commission will also heavily focus on engaging the local business community to provide opportunities for students to explore a variety of work experiences while in school

and to attain gainful employment after exiting the school system. Our students with disabilities have great talents to share, just as every student does. Project SEARCH, which the County Council strongly supports, is just one example of how students with disabilities can excel and find employment, simply by being given an internship, an opportunity. We hope to show employers that these transitioning students are capable of working, committed to their jobs, and, most importantly, competent in their ability to contribute to the business community. They just need the opportunity.

The Commission will also focus on those students with the most significant needs. It will strive to provide families with necessary resources for the post-secondary years, for life after 21.

Howard County has much to be proud of in its values as a community. We strive for inclusion, collaboration, partnership. We value diversity and accept differences. We believe in working together so that everyone has a chance—a chance to succeed, a chance to contribute, a chance to live fulfilled lives.

In closing, I strongly support the establishment of the Commission for Transitioning Students with Disabilities. I assure you that the Commission will be steadfast in its efforts to promote the importance of including all people in Howard County in our schools, businesses, and community.

Please support the passage of this bill in order to improve the outcomes for students with disabilities as they transition from the school system to adulthood.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth Benevides

APPENDIX:

It is currently projected that the Howard County Public School System will transition 1700 students with disabilities out of the school system in the next five years.

Grade	Diploma	Certificate of	Total
8	317	42	359
9	349	44	393
10	247	51	298
11	227	84	311
12+ (includes traditional 12 th grade students as well as certificate- seeking students through age 21)*	232	109	341
Totals	1372	330	1702

*Students who do not earn a diploma and instead seek a certificate of program completion are entitled by law to educational services until age 21. The purpose of this additional time is to provide more opportunities for building educational, employment, and independent skills.