



**Autism
Society**
Howard
County



To: MD State House Ways and Means Committee

CC: MD State Legislature – Howard County Delegates
MD State Legislature – Howard County Senators

From: Howard County Autism Society
Pathfinders for Autism

Date: February 3, 2022

Subject: HCAS Support of HB226 – Public Schools - Use of Video Recording Devices in Self-Contained Special Education Classrooms

Dear Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

On behalf of the Howard County Autism Society and Pathfinders for Autism, we are collectively submitting this testimony today to express our strong support for HB226 – Use of Video Recording Devices in Self-Contained Special Education Classrooms – submitted by Delegates Guyton and Luedtke.

Although we were disappointed that bill did not move forward in 2019 or 2020, we are grateful to Delegate Guyton and Senator Luedtke for moving ahead again this year in support of our most vulnerable residents. Hopefully, the third time will be the charm for this important effort.

The number of stories continue to grow each year of camera footage capturing abuse of children in our schools. Yet, for every one of these instances, there are many more reported or suspected cases of abuse that could be confirmed or refuted if there was a systematic way to capture video evidence in the matter. We are all acutely aware of the ruling by the Department of Justice right here in our own state when staff from Frederick County Public Schools illegally restrained students with disabilities. Our non-speaking children – with Autism or other disabilities – could never have shared with their family and loved ones that they had been harmed. But a camera may have captured and possibly prevented those incidents. Several other states, including our neighbor, West Virginia, have heeded the message and implemented similar legislation in an effort to protect our students.

Children in Special Education classrooms are especially vulnerable to abuse because they often lack the ability to fully communicate any concerns adequately, creating the potential for egregious and continuing victimization. This bill is designed to provide recordings in self-



contained special education classrooms where these children may be isolated with limited staff and students, and has the potential to significantly reduce abuse, neglect, bullying, harassment or other behaviors/violations against our children who may not be able to fully advocate for their own safety and well-being. We must do better to protect this vulnerable population of students and continue to provide quality instruction in a safe environment conducive to learning. Although a bit more limited than last year, this bill still provides a much-needed step towards that end.

We also believe that this bill as written addresses any potential concerns about the use of the cameras for monitoring teachers and it sets forth clear guidelines for viewing the recordings. In our opinion, this balanced bill provides much needed protections to our most vulnerable children, and does not endanger the privacy of the children or staff. To that end, we recommend that implementation of this important protection be done with sufficient planning to provide consistency across the state. It is imperative that the school systems, staff, and parents can be confident that this key initiative is installed with rigor and efficacy and with proper safeguards.

Thank you in advance for your strong consideration in supporting this bill for the protection of our community. We must make this a reality for the benefit of our school staff, our families, and, most importantly, our children that may not be able to advocate or protect themselves.

We once again would like to thank Ms. Lori Scott for her work in advocating for this bill, and Delegate Guyton for sponsoring this bill on the floor. Your efforts on behalf of our community are very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Rienzi".

Rebecca Rienzi
Executive Director
Pathfinders for Autism
rrienzi@pathfindersforautism.org
443-330-5370 x101

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melissa Rosenberg".

Melissa Rosenberg
Executive Director
Howard County Autism Society
Melissa.rosenberg@howard-autism.org
410-290-3466