



Opportunities for Teachers,  
Results for Urban Students

**JESSICA ELLIS' TESTIMONY BEFORE MARYLAND STATE SENATE BUDGET & TAXATION  
COMMITTEE ON BEHALF OF SENATE BILL SB910 TO ESTABLISH "MARYLAND  
EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIVE."**

**March 17, 2016**

Esteemed Chair and Committee members,

I am honored to be here today to testify on behalf of Senate Bill SB910 to establish the "Maryland Education Development Collaborative." I come as a veteran teacher, a parent of two children in PG County public schools, and a passionate advocate for public education who believes that our state can and should be leading the country in academic achievement and education reform. I was here two weeks ago with my fourth graders, my son was here last Friday with his peers, and I am proud to be here again today to offer my insights as to why this bill is essential.

Senate Bill 910 proposes to establish the Maryland Education Development Collaboration. This organization will endeavor to increase socioeconomic and demographic diversity in our public schools in the interest of closing the achievement gap for our neediest students. I am here to demonstrate why this entity is crucial to the future of our citizens.

I have been an elementary school teacher for twelve years. Every year during Black History Month I read biographies of influential African Americans with my students. One of my favorite moments is when my students are gathered on the rug before me with a biography of Dr. King or Ruby Bridges or Thurgood Marshall, and I say to them, "In 1954 you would not have been allowed to go to school together." As the realization washes over them, there follows a chorus of protests as they look at their adored friends of many colors and backgrounds and say, "What?! No way! That's impossible!" It's a beautiful moment as we all share a little pride for the progress we have made in this great country.

However, this year when I brought my students to the rug and arrived at my usual line, it was met with confused silence. I looked out over my sea of 26 bright faces, each one

of them a beautiful shade of brown, and I didn't know what to tell them. I do not have a single white child in my class.

In our school of over 700 students, we have fewer than ten white non-Hispanic children. Nearly 90% of our students qualify for free and reduced meals. Most of them speak Spanish as their first language. It's not that there are no white or middle class children in our neighborhood. My children are two of them. But at present the majority of middle class families choose private, parochial, charters, or magnet schools, or they choose to homeschool. They do everything to avoid sending their kids to the predominantly low-income local public school.

This is just one of many anecdotes I could share to demonstrate that our public education system suffers from de facto segregation.

Many studies have shown that as our country is becoming more ethnically diverse, our schools have become more segregated. A 2010 report by the Civil Rights Project found that Maryland was the sixth-most-segregated state in the country for black students. In Prince George's County, where I live and work, 9 of 10 black students attended a school where at least 90 percent of students were minorities.

As early as the 1960s we have understood that the two greatest predictors of student academic success are the socioeconomic status of the student's family, and the socioeconomic status of the students' peers. That is to say that low-income children who attend mixed income schools will achieve at higher rates. With a state as segregated as ours, it is no wonder that our achievement gap is also one of the greatest in the country. According to our 2013 NAEP scores, the gap in average math scores between black and white fourth-graders in Maryland was the fifth-worst in the nation, and in reading the gap was the ninth-worst.

I am here to testify that the problem is acute and the need for change is immediate. When we delay on educational reform, in the blink of an eye we have lost a generation of children to failed policies.

The data is conclusive that our public education system in Maryland demands attention and action. The achievement gap is growing. We need to be proactive. We need an entity that will pursue innovative solutions to these demographic shifts. The Maryland Educational Development Collaborative, or EDCo, will work to ensure that all of our children have access to the future envisioned by Dr. King or Ruby Bridges or Thurgood Marshall over 50 years ago. The future is now.

Thank you,

Jessica Ellis  
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