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## THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Dear Members of the Board of Education:

We, the undersigned Montgomery County elected officials, encourage the Board to reevaluate its policy regarding excused absences for students involved in civic engagement.

We understand that in September 2018, board member Patricia O'Neill introduced a policy proposal that would have allowed MCPS students to be excused up to three times per year to participate in civic engagement activities. Per the initial proposal, the student's parent, the school's principal, and the sponsoring organization would have had to approve the absence.

In January of this year, you tabled the proposal. In the wake of the recent wave of climate protests, we hope the Board will reopen its examination into this important topic.

We agree with our county's student activists who argue that civic engagement supplements, rather than impedes, their classroom studies. Indeed, several studies have concluded that civic engagement activities yield greater learning and higher graduation rates. By applying academic concepts in the real world, students shift from being knowledge receivers to being idea creators. The research is clear: Civic engagement teaches higher-order skills—including critical thinking, writing, technology, and coalition building—at more advanced levels of aptitude. These skills will serve our students well not only in college and their careers, but throughout their lives, making them engaged citizens capable of advocating for what they believe in.

Unfortunately, the prospect of an unexcused absence poses a significant hurdle to students who would otherwise participate in, and reap the rewards from, civic engagement. These challenges disproportionately affect students of color, for whom unexcused absences or missed schoolwork carry harsher consequences. Excusing absences abates these concerns and offers students from all backgrounds a more equal chance to participate.

We are sympathetic to the safety risks and disruptions posed by large numbers of students leaving school during instructional hours. However, we are optimistic that the Board of Education can craft a policy that grapples with those challenges. At least three nearby school systems—in the District of Columbia, Arlington County, and Fairfax County—currently excuse absences for civic engagement if a guardian provides written

permission in advance of the absence. Fairfax County's policy is particularly instructive because, like Montgomery County, many of its schools lack direct access to Metro stations. If other large, diverse school districts can successfully manage these safety and logistical hurdles, we are confident that Montgomery County can do so as well.

We urge the Board to resume discussion on this issue. We are hopeful that, with input from students, parents, and teachers, the Board can forge a consensus that keeps students safe while allowing them to exercise their First Amendment rights and fight for a better world.

Sincerely,

Councilmember Evan Glass  
Councilmember Tom Hucker  
Councilmember Will Jawando  
Councilmember Hans Riemer  
Senator Susan Lee  
Senator Will Smith  
Delegate Gabriel Acevero  
Delegate Lorig Charkoudian  
Delegate Charlotte Crutchfield  
Delegate Bonnie Cullison  
Delegate Ariana Kelly  
Delegate David Moon  
Delegate Julie Palakovich Carr  
Delegate Kirill Reznik  
Delegate Emily Shetty  
Delegate Jared Solomon  
Delegate Vaughn Stewart  
Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins