



MAYOR'S OFFICE OF CHILDREN & FAMILY SUCCESS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Molly Rath
(410) 591-6411 molly.rath@baltimorecity.gov

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Baltimore Youth Add Experience to Kirwan Advocacy

BALTIMORE, MD. — Last fall, Mayor Bernard C. “Jack” Young and the Mayor’s Office of Children & Family Success began working with eight Baltimore City youth to bring student voice and perspective to the Kirwan Commission discussions. The vocal group of youth advocates, known as [Youth Champions for Kirwan](#), have spent months engaging with partner organizations—Strong Schools Maryland, the Baltimore City Youth Commission, the Intersection and others—that are leading the way to deepen support of the Kirwan Commission recommendations, now the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future legislation (HB1300, SB1000).

To date, the Youth Champions have led a thoughtful youth activation plan. They’ve:

- met with leaders of Maryland’s grassroots campaign to learn the details of the Kirwan Commission recommendations
- hosted a school-based youth forum with Kirwan Commission Chair Dr. Brit Kirwan
- organized a briefing with the city’s finance team to understand the local revenue and budgeting implications
- consulted with Mayor Young’s government relations team for insight into the inner workings of Annapolis
- participated in a Kirwan coalition press conference, two Annapolis rallies and two hearings on the recommendations
- and met with Gov. Larry Hogan’s Chief Legislative Officer, Keiffer Mitchell, to hear the administration’s position on the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future

“It’s important to me to have a voice at the table, a chance to speak up about what students need,” says Jasha Prince, a Youth Champion and junior at Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School.

“Kirwan can change the landscape of education in Maryland long-term,” adds fellow Mervo junior and Youth Champion Christian Ato. “It can break the cycle of mass incarceration, for example. My worst fear is that when I one day become a prosecutor, I’ll go to court and see someone in the same position as me but who did not have access to the same opportunities and took a different and negative path.”

In a letter delivered by the Youth Champions to the governor last month, the youth advocates wrote, “We are the students who need the world-class education everybody has been talking about for the last four years. We want to make sure the voice and presence of young people are in the mix as lawmakers debate the details of this legislation and our future.”

Youth Champions for Kirwan is a youth advocacy initiative launched and supported by the Mayor’s Office of Children & Family Success. Youth engagement is one of the office’s core organizing principles. “Part of wrapping our arms around our young people is creating opportunities that validate them, acknowledge their voice and allow them to develop strong leadership skills—all of which starts with making sure all of our children have access to a world-class education,” says Executive Director Tisha Edwards.

“The most direct path out of poverty is through educational attainment,” she adds. “In Baltimore and across Maryland, too many children don’t have the public education system they deserve—due to insufficient funding and low expectations for our students. The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future would dramatically alter the current education landscape. And as the key stakeholders in this policy debate, our youth must be able to advocate on their own behalf.”

“Baltimore’s young people stepped up and led,” says Mayor Bernard C. “Jack” Young. “I urge my fellow elected officials in Annapolis to listen to them carefully and take note of what they have to say. They represent truth, and the reason the Kirwan Commission recommendations matter.”

The Youth Champions emerged out of a larger group of Baltimore youth who in November started learning about school funding in Maryland. Hosting two “Kirwan 101 sessions” with Strong Schools Maryland, they set out to understand the context for and details of the Kirwan Commission recommendations for increased school funding and improved educational outcomes. And knowing these would roll up into legislation for the 2020 General Assembly session—and that Baltimore City stood to gain the most or the least from the legislation due to its high rate of concentrated poverty—a subset of these emerging youth leaders committed to letting lawmakers know what’s at stake for them and the future of Baltimore.

"The Youth Champions have been critical in elevating student voice around this once-in-a-generation opportunity," says Joe Francaviglia, Executive Director, Strong Schools Maryland. "This legislation will impact every student and it is important that the student voice helps inform the final outcome."

As a Youth Champion "I get to be a voice for the values so many people feel strongly but don't know how to speak up about," says Jordan Jackson, a sophomore at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute.

"Everyone deserves an equal opportunity," adds Keegan Taylor, the Chair of the Baltimore City Youth Commission and a Poly junior. "At Poly we have very good student supports. Not every public school does."

In addition to two students each from Mervo and Poly, the Youth Champions for Kirwan include students from Youth Opportunity Academy, Baltimore City College and a first-year college student at the Community College of Baltimore County.

And now, as informed advocates of the Kirwan Commission recommendations, the Youth Champions are educating their peers and securing petition signatures in support of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

"Funding schools could seriously impact poverty," says Mervo's Ato. "It will really help our children feel like they have futures and hope."

"Kirwan *will* pass," says Poly's Taylor.