



## **JMB's Merin Thomas to Serve as 2022-2023 Student Member of the Maryland State Board of Education**



Merin Thomas, currently a junior at James M. Bennett High School this year, will represent the nearly 900,000 students in Maryland Public Schools as the 2022-2023 Student Member of the Maryland State Board of Education.

Following an extensive application and interview process conducted by the Maryland Association of Student Councils, Thomas was one of two finalists whose name was forwarded to Gov. Larry Hogan for consideration for the position of Student Member of the Board (SMOB). The governor nominated Thomas for the post, and now the Maryland Senate has officially confirmed her appointment. The Wicomico County Board of Education and Superintendent of Schools will recognize Thomas for this honor at the start of the April 12 Board meeting.



Thomas, who will turn 17 in April, has attended Wicomico County Public Schools since 2010, first at Pemberton Elementary and then at Salisbury Middle and James M. Bennett High. In addition to English, Thomas is fluent in Hindi and Malayalam, and she is endeavoring to learn American Sign Language. She was born in India, the daughter of Thomas Abraham and Reena Thomas, who immigrated to the United States with their children.

“I am so grateful to my family – my parents and my siblings—for always believing in me,” she said.

In the personal statement that accompanied her application to serve on the State Board, Thomas shared this: “I am running for SMOB to become a voice for each child in Maryland; my prime focus being the smaller counties of Maryland. Many students from these smaller counties wish they had the same chances as kids up north of Maryland and with my experience, as someone from a small county, I believe it will benefit the Board. Ensuring that students from each county feel seen and heard would be one of the priorities I choose to accomplish.”

### **At 16, Committed to a Life of Leadership and Service**

Thomas began her leadership journey at Salisbury Middle School, serving as leader of the National Junior Honor Society. As a student at James M. Bennett High, she has served as the Historian for the Class of 2023 for the past three years.

Seeking opportunities to serve and make a difference both in school and in the community, she led a Women’s Drive to collect menstrual products and women’s undergarments for those in need and to reduce the stigma female students may experience because of their periods. She says that as the voice of the students, she will advocate for better education on menstrual hygiene for all students through health classes, and greater leniency on absences for female students who are struggling with the symptoms of menstruation. She will also advocate for more access to safe “escapes” for young people in underprivileged communities – such as after-school programs – and more flexibility for instruction from home for students who are dealing with COVID-related anxiety.

Her other leadership activities at school include Concert Choir (Section Leader this year), SMART (Solutions for Multicultural Achievement and Recognition Team) Club President since 2020, and FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America) historian in 2020. She is a member of the National Honor Society, W.E.B. Dubois Honor Society, Mock Trial, the Leo Club for service, and Environmental Club. She has supported other students by working as a junior educator with Kumon in Salisbury and by serving as a mentor. Thomas has pursued creative writing through TheLilacBlog and the Young Authors’ Contest, in which she earned a 2<sup>nd</sup>-Place award last year. She is an honor roll student at JMB.

“The role of the student member in the Maryland State Board of Education is to advocate for their peers. In addition, the student member must provide a sense of leadership, show maturity, and be a voice that represents both the youth of Maryland as well as members of the Board,” Thomas wrote in her personal statement. “I work to be dependable, empathetic, and to take my responsibilities seriously. I take every opportunity to be involved with my peers and community. I make sure to be the person that my peers can approach, whether they need a

helping hand or just want someone to talk to. I believe my experiences as a South Asian student will ensure that everyone will always have an equal voice on the Maryland State BOE. I firmly believe I will fit the role of being a student member on the board and carry the title with pride.”



### **Becoming a Voice for All Maryland Students**

Starting July 1, 2022, Thomas will be the first Wicomico student to serve on the Maryland State Board of Education since Derek Wu, also of James M. Bennett High. He served in 2008-2009. Wu recently completed his doctoral degree and this fall will be an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Economics at the University of Virginia. Thomas said she is looking forward to serving all Maryland students while also representing her school and her school system, and believes she will gain invaluable experience from her year on the State Board.

“Students look towards the student members of the (State Board of Education) to embody the ideas that students from all parts of Maryland want to see implemented in their schools/counties ... Even though Wicomico County does not have the same resources as students from northern Maryland, this doesn't mean the students are not successful. Multiple students have left Wicomico County and have gone to achieve amazing careers, with some going into the Naval Academy, full rides to state schools, and acceptances into Ivy League colleges. It isn't impossible to be from a small town and be successful, but by having discussions with students that went on to achieve bigger things, I can understand why they wished they had the same support and importance as other counties in Maryland.”

Thomas was well supported in her quest to become SMOB by some of the educators who know her best. Here are excerpts from their recommendations.

“As an advisor of SMART, I have been in awe of Merin's diligence and her willingness to go above and beyond what is needed. Merin's ability as a leader has grown over the past year

because of participating in a variety of activities even during COVID. Her initiatives have brought her praises not just from me but other teachers as well. Merin has contributed in many positive ways to the betterment of our school and our school climate. Merin is creative, independent, confident and is an excellent team player. Merin is very sincere and dedicated in everything that she does. In addition to all the amazing characteristics that Merin has, what makes Merin unique is that she cares. Merin cares about everyone and everything she does. She has the ability to bring out the best in everyone. She is a 'change maker' and I am waiting to see all the great things that Merin is going to accomplish."

-Hemalatha Bhaskaran, Supervisor of Science for Wicomico County Public Schools, 2020-2021 Wicomico Teacher of the Year while teaching Environmental Science at JMB, and SMART Club advisor

"Merin shows a strong desire to not only better herself as an individual but to improve the world for those around her. She is very dedicated to making her own personal journey more enriched with different experiences. She wishes to not just gain a grade but to truly learn the content and material in her classes. Merin wants to help others become more successful and enjoy whatever they elect to pursue. She is compassionate to those in need and wants to make her community a better place to be. Because of these and many other tremendous qualities, I wholeheartedly recommend Merin Thomas for the student position on the Maryland Board of Education. She has a lot to offer with her creativity, thoughtfulness, and imagination. The Board would be lucky to have her and her drive and dedication."

-Dr. Katherine E. Kudzma, AP World History teacher, James M. Bennett High

"From the time I met Merin, I knew she was destined to great things. Always one to support her peers, she often would offer to tutor other students after school or during lunch, assist in whatever way possible in the classroom, and rise to do her absolute best on her own assignments. ... Throughout my twenty-two years as an educator, I've observed that there are students that I know will do what it takes to be successful in life—they have significant drive, determination, grit, and focus. There are also students who honestly care about the wellbeing of others and hope to serve their community. Merin Thomas is the rare student who can do both successfully and with grace."

-Tara Elliott, President of the Eastern Shore Writers Association, Director of Salisbury Poetry Week, and Merin's English Language Arts teacher in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade

"Merin has been an outstanding student throughout high school ... She continues to challenge herself academically by enrolling in AP courses and had a 4.25 GPA first term this school year ... Merin is a great student who is actively involved during and after school. She is also involved in her community and organized a women's drive and has previously volunteered as a mentor."

-Christel Savage, Principal of James M. Bennett High

"In AP World History class, Merin always seeks to improve with each assignment. When examining her work, she always challenges herself to go beyond expectations when answering questions and increase her depth and details in her writing. Thomas participates in class discussion adding insightful comments and inquiring about a good many topics to add to her depth of knowledge. She isn't afraid to take risks and ask questions. Merin assists those around her trying to help others become more successful and comprehend class themes and concepts to a higher degree. The atmosphere in our class is one where students feel comfortable contributing and where they are not afraid to ask questions in a large part thanks to Merin."

-Dr. Kudzma, AP World History teacher, James M. Bennett High