

MARYLAND COALITION TO REFORM SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE SENATE BILL 830: EDUCATION – ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS – REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

MARCH 3, 2020

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Maryland Coalition to Reform School Discipline (CRSD) brings together advocates, service providers, and community members dedicated to transforming school discipline practices within Maryland’s public school systems. We are committed to making discipline responsive to students’ behavioral needs, fair, appropriate to the infraction, and designed to keep youth on track to graduate. **CRSD strongly supports Senate Bill 830**, which would require local boards of education to annually report data and information on alternative schools and programs to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), the Governor, and the General Assembly.

Nearly all school systems in Maryland operate alternative schools or programs for children with behavior challenges and children who have been suspended or expelled. However, neither MSDE nor local school systems currently collect or publicly report centralized data or information on alternative schools, such as their educational programming, staffing, student assignment procedures, student demographics, and academic outcomes. CRSD supports SB 830 to fill this significant gap in information for the following reasons:

National research has shown that attending behavior-focused alternative schools is significantly associated with earning fewer credits, lower attendance, and higher suspension rates than attending regular schools.¹ SB 830 requires reporting on courses offered, opportunities to earn credits, student achievement data, and discipline policies and practices at Maryland’s alternative schools to illuminate whether these trends are occurring in our state.

Nationally, alternative schools disproportionately enroll students of color. Black boys represent 8% of enrollment in regular schools but 16% of enrollment in alternative schools across the country.² In Maryland, Black students represent 34% of the student population but 59% of students suspended or expelled.³ SB 830 requires reporting on the demographics of students enrolled in Maryland’s alternative schools and programs, including grade, race/ethnicity, and gender, to determine whether the disproportionality in suspension rates

¹ Wilkerson, K. L., Afacan, K., Perzigian, A. B., Justin, W., & Lequia, J. (2016). Behavior-focused alternative schools: Impact on student outcomes. *Behavioral Disorders*, 41(2), 81-94.

² U. S. Government Accountability Office (2019). *K-12 education: Certain groups of students attend alternative schools in greater proportions than they do other schools*. <https://www.gao.gov/reports/GAO-19-373/>

³ Suspensions, Expulsions, and Health Related Exclusions, Maryland Public Schools, 2018-2019, Maryland State Department of Education, September 2019, <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20182019Student/2019SuspensionsExpulsionSHRExc.pdf>

extends to behavior-focused alternative schools. This is necessary to understand whether such schools and programs are operating, in practice, as racially-segregated educational settings.

Alternative schools also disproportionately enroll students with disabilities nationally. Boys with disabilities represent 8% of enrollment in regular schools but 11% of enrollment in alternative schools across the country.⁴ In Maryland, students with disabilities represent 12% of the student population but 25% of students suspended or expelled.⁵ SB 830 requires reporting on the disability status of students enrolled in Maryland's alternative schools and programs to indicate whether this disproportionality in suspension rates extends to Maryland's behavior-focused alternative schools. SB 830 also requires reporting on the provision of special education and related services at alternative schools to elucidate whether they are being provided appropriately to students with disabilities.

A lower percentage of alternative schools nationally have support staff like social workers, nurses, and counselors as compared to regular schools.⁶ This pattern is particularly troubling because the students who attend alternative schools tend to have the greatest need for the services offered by such support staff. SB 830 requires reporting on mental health, counseling, social-emotional learning, and behavioral support services provided at Maryland's alternative schools and programs to make clear whether the most vulnerable students are receiving the supports they need to be successful.

Every time a child changes schools, including being transferred to an alternative school, he loses 3 months of academic progress. This setback is due to disruption to classwork, breaking of relationships with teachers and peers, and stigma from being kicked out.⁷ SB 830 requires reporting on the reasons students are placed in Maryland's alternative schools and the procedures for placing students in such programs and returning them to their regular schools to provide a window into whether students are being transferred to alternative schools for appropriate reasons and via clear and fair procedures.

Members of CRSD work directly with students, families, and community stakeholders across the state. Based on their experiences, many alternative schools and programs in Maryland may be of poor quality, lack clear or fair procedures by which students enter or exit, and contribute to racial and disability-based segregation in public education. However, without any clear public reporting mechanism, it is difficult to understand the nature and scope of these challenges, or formulate effective strategies to address them. Therefore, **SB 830 aims to shed light on this important issue to provide a basis for well-informed policies and practices around educating all Maryland students.**

For these reasons, CRSD strongly supports Senate Bill 830.

⁴ U. S. Government Accountability Office, *supra*.

⁵ Maryland State Department of Education, *supra*.

⁶ U. S. Government Accountability Office, *supra*.

⁷ Sarah Sparks, *Student Mobility: How it Affects Learning*, Education Week (August 11, 2016), <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/student-mobility/index.html>

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