

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 764
Education—Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today Program—Established
and Mandated Funding

House Ways and Means Committee

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Government Relations

The Maryland State Education Association opposes House Bill 764, which would establish and provide mandatory annual funding for the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) voucher program.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

Since 2017, there has been much debate and discussion about what it would take to provide a world-class education to all of Maryland's children, regardless of zip code. MSEA was an active, engaged participant in those discussions and in the deliberations of the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education (also known as the Kirwan Commission). We know all too well that providing a world-class education for all of Maryland's students will require a significant, systemic overhaul to the way in which our public schools operate and are funded. It is for this reason that MSEA stands as a staunch advocate for the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and strong voice among the statewide chorus calling for an override of the Governor's short-sighted veto of the Blueprint.

In the months preceding the introduction of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, MSEA along with over fifty statewide advocacy organizations held dozens of community forums across the state, asking students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders what the schools in their communities needed in order to provide a world class education to all of their students. We heard time and again



about the need for more supports—particularly wraparound services—for our most vulnerable students. We heard a strong desire for robust career and technical education offerings that could provide apprenticeships and industry certification for students who are interested in a path that didn't involve college. We heard time and again about the need for more well-trained, high quality educators in our schools—providing individualized instruction, smaller class sizes, and more academic support to all of our students. We heard about the need to provide all children with a solid foundation for learning by expanding universal PreK, particularly for our three- and four-year-olds growing up in areas of concentrated poverty.

These needs have increased exponentially thanks in large part to the catastrophic, wide-ranged, generational damage wrought by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Any reasonable prognostication, regardless of its level of pragmatism, would be hard pressed to conclude that these needs will not be a reality we are forced to collectively face well into the future.

Trusting that the great majority of the members of the Maryland General Assembly understand the gravity of the challenges we face and are unequivocal in their belief that the Blueprint is essential for stabilizing and strengthening our state's public education system, we remain optimistic that the Governor's short-sighted veto of the Blueprint will be successfully overturned. As a result, the very arduous work of implementing significant operational policy changes in how we educate our state's children as well as the need to secure the significant financial investments required from both the state and local governments will be nothing shy of a herculean effort. Nevertheless, we must all remain steadfast in our knowledge that investing in our state's most precious resource is one of the most important responsibilities our body politic collectively shares.

It is with this clarity of vision and purpose that MSEA members find ourselves struggling mightily to comprehend the logic of proffering this legislation, particularly given its tone deaf goal of diverting precious financial resources away from the public institutions upon which we will increasingly rely and directing them toward enshrining into statute the irrefutably misguided public policy failure known as the BOOST voucher program. Every year since its inception, MSEA has presented both research and budgetary data showing that this program is absolutely not in the best interests of the state or its young people. And every year, the governor seeks to increase funding for the program despite numerous problems and shortfalls. And to make matters worse, this legislation seeks to double down on this failure by increasing the funding for the voucher program about that which has been recently earmarked in the Governor's annual budget.



Over the years, we have pointed out that this program continually benefits a small fraction of students—most of whom were previously private school students—at the expense of hundreds of thousands of other students attending public schools. According to the January 2021 Joint Committee Report (dated January 7, 2021), of the 2,880 students currently receiving BOOST vouchers, only 43 percent (1,240 students) are either new or renewed public school students—the very students who were said to be the primary beneficiaries of this program. While the number of public school students participating in the voucher program has increased over the previous year, the overall majority of students receiving vouchers (57 percent or 1,640 students) continue to be ones who originally attended private schools.

These numbers clearly affirm one, undeniable truth: this voucher program is a reckless, fiduciarily irresponsible public policy failure. Continuing to fund it under the guise of it being a means by which public school students in failing schools can have access to a better performing private school is a complete fallacy; one that this state can no longer afford—be that in budget language or in statute. Furthermore, continuing this program has entangled the state the unnecessary, potentially expensive burden of the *Bethel Ministries, Inc. v. Dr. Karen B. Salmon, et. al* federal lawsuit.

The choice in the go forward couldn't be more stark: we can wisely invest our precious financial resources and supports in the Blueprint's successful implementation—and in doing so, provide a world-class public school education to all of Maryland's students, especially those who are the most in need and who are most vulnerable—or we foolishly gamble our financial resources away by throwing them into the public policy quagmire that is the undeniable public policy failure that is the BOOST voucher program.

We strongly urge an unfavorable report on House Bill 764.