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Testimony Before the Maryland House Appropriations Committee Regarding HB 1156

Tim Benson, Policy Analyst

The Heartland Institute

March 15, 2022

Chairwoman McIntosh and members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this hearing on HB 1156.

My name is Tim Benson, and I am a policy analyst with The Heartland Institute. The Heartland Institute is a 37-year-old independent, national, nonprofit organization whose mission is to discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions to social and economic problems. Heartland is headquartered in Illinois and focuses on providing national, state, and local elected officials with reliable and timely research and analysis on important policy issues.

I am writing today to speak in favor of enacting the Education Savings Account Program

* * *

If passed, the ESAs would be available to children attending a Maryland public school and the children of active duty military personnel residing in the state to pay for tuition, curriculum, and fees at private and parochial schools. The funds could also be used to pay for textbooks, uniforms, tutoring services, instructional materials, online courses, and educational therapies and services. The ESAs could also be used to cover the fees required to take national standardized achievement tests, such as the SAT or ACT.

Accounts would be funded at 75 percent of the “per pupil amount of state and local funds for each education program in the resident school district for which the eligible student would be included in the enrollment count for [budget] calculations” under state law for those students living in households with incomes below 500 percent of the federal poverty level. For those families with incomes above 500

percent of the federal poverty level, funding would be 50 percent.

[Copious empirical research](#)¹ on [school choice programs](#)² like education savings accounts makes clear these programs offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children's unique needs and circumstances, and that these programs improve academic performance and attainment and deliver a quality education at lower cost than traditional public schools. Additionally, these programs benefit public school students and taxpayers by increasing competition, decreasing segregation, and improving civic values and practices.

Research also shows students at private schools are [less likely](#) than their public school peers to experience problems such as alcohol abuse, bullying, drug use, fighting, gang activity, racial tension, theft, vandalism, and weapon-based threats.³ There is also a [strong causal link](#) suggesting private school choice programs improve the mental health of participating students.⁴

Further, Maryland's public schools are habitually failing the state's children. In 2019, only [39 percent](#)⁵ of public school fourth-graders and [33 percent](#)⁶ of eighth-graders tested "proficient" to grade level in mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) examination, colloquially known as the "Nation's Report Card." Just [35 percent](#)⁷ of fourth-

¹ EdChoice, *The 123's of School Choice*, April 14, 2021, https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021-123s-SlideShare_FINAL.pdf.

² Greg Forster, *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice*, EdChoice, May 18, 2016, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf>.

³ M. Danish Shakeel and Corey A. DeAngelis, "Can private schools improve school climate? Evidence from a nationally representative sample," *Journal of School Choice*, Volume 12, Issue 3, August 8, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15582159.2018.1490383?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=wjsc20>.

⁴ Corey A. DeAngelis and Angela K. Dills, *The Effects of School Choice on Mental Health*, October 29, 2018, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3272550.

⁵ "2019 Mathematics State Snapshot Report – Maryland, Grade 4" Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020013MD4.pdf>.

⁶ "2019 Mathematics State Snapshot Report – Maryland, Grade 8" Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020013MD8.pdf>.

⁷ "2019 Reading State Snapshot Report – Maryland, Grade 4" Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014MD4.pdf>.

graders and [36 percent](#)⁸ of eighth-graders tested “proficient” in reading. Essentially, and embarrassingly, the state’s public schools are failing to educate roughly seven out of ten Maryland children to grade-level proficiency in reading and math.

NAEP scores for Baltimore City public schools were even more dismal. Only [15 percent](#)⁹ of fourth-graders and [10 percent](#)¹⁰ of eighth-graders tested proficient to grade level in math in 2019, while just [13 percent](#)¹¹ of fourth-graders and [15 percent](#)¹² of eighth-graders were proficient in reading.

These numbers are [backed up by scores](#) on the from the 2021 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program.¹³ Roughly 81 percent of students in grades 3–5 were not proficient to grade level in math, while 76 percent were not proficient in English Language Arts (ELA).¹⁴ Another 94 percent seventh- and eighth-grade students were not proficient in mathematics, including 95 percent of Baltimore City students.¹⁵

It is probably these dismal results, and also because teacher unions have repeatedly played politics with school closings during the COVID-19 pandemic in direct conflict with students’ best interests, that education choice programs like ESAs are more popular with parents than ever before. Polling by EdChoice released in September 2021 found [78 percent support](#) for ESAs, for

⁸ “2019 Reading State Snapshot Report – Maryland, Grade 8” Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014MD8.pdf>.

⁹ “2019 Mathematics Trial Urban District Snapshot Report – Baltimore City, Grade 4” Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020015XM4.pdf>.

¹⁰ “2019 Mathematics Trial Urban District Snapshot Report – Baltimore City, Grade 8” Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020015XM8.pdf>.

¹¹ “2019 Reading Trial Urban District Snapshot Report – Baltimore City, Grade 4” Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020016XM4.pdf>.

¹² “2019 Reading Trial Urban District Snapshot Report – Baltimore City, Grade 8” Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020016XM8.pdf>.

¹³ Chris Papst, “Staggering learning loss, 85% of Maryland students tested were not proficient in math,” *Fox 45 News*, March 10, 2022, <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/project-baltimore/staggering-learning-loss-85-of-maryland-students-tested-were-not-proficient-in-math>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

example, among the general public and 84 percent among current school parents.¹⁶ These findings are mirrored in the American Federation for Children’s seventh-annual [National School Choice Poll](#), released in January 2021, which found 78 percent support for ESA programs.¹⁷

The goal of public education in Maryland today and in the years to come should be to allow all parents to choose which schools their children attend, require every school to compete for every student who walks through its doors, and make sure every child has the opportunity to attend a quality school. Enacting this ESA program is a logical step forward in meeting that goal. There has not been a time when providing these opportunities has been more urgent and more needed than right now.

Thank you for your time.

For more information about The Heartland Institute’s work, please visit our Web site at www.heartland.org or <http://news.heartland.org>, or contact our Government Relations Department at 312/377-4000 or reach them by email at governmentrelations@heartland.org.

¹⁶ Andrew D. Catt, John Kristof, and Paul DiPerna, *2021 Schooling America Survey*, EdChoice, September 2, 2021, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-Schooling-in-America-PROJECT.pdf>.

¹⁷ American Federation for Children, “School Choice in the Era of Coronavirus: AFC’s Seventh Annual National Survey Results,” January 21, 2021, <https://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/1-21-21-AFC-2021-National-Release-Memo-Final.pdf>.