

**Testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 698
Labor and Employment – State Minimum Wage Rate - Increase**

**House Economic Matters Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association supports House Bill 698, which speeds up the implementation of the \$15 minimum wage and eliminates the Board of Public Works' ability to temporarily suspend the phase-in.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators 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).

MSEA has supported the Fight for Fifteen and believes that now is the right time to increase the speed of the phase-in, as low-wage workers continue to struggle to recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fair wages have been a priority for MSEA because employees receiving livable wages are better prepared to meet the many challenges of raising and sustaining a family. Children who live in households of high poverty, frequent unemployment, and inadequate health care often have greater difficulty learning in school. The Commission on Innovation & Excellence in Education ("The Kirwan Commission") concluded that living in areas of high concentrations of poverty has a serious detrimental impact on children and impedes their level of educational achievement. Teachers cannot teach children who are so hungry their ability to think suffers. Teachers cannot teach to children who are not there because they have sicknesses that drag on due to lack of healthcare. Teachers cannot teach to an empty desk because the child's family is continuously moving to find work.

Closing the education achievement gap for students involves addressing economic disparities that have eliminated much of the middle class. This legislation makes a renewed commitment to Maryland families to increase wages, rebuild the middle class, and improve the quality of life statewide.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the inequities in this state. While those at the top of the income ladder have gotten richer, many in service level jobs have fallen deeper in poverty. Importantly, this bill also eliminates the so-called "off ramp" for the phase-in of the \$15 minimum wage. Families need an increase to the minimum wage, especially with the current high inflation, making the cost of living increase.

For those reasons, MSEA urges a favorable report on House Bill 698.