



**Testimony in SUPPORT of
Senate Bill 161: Community Schools - Alterations**

Appropriations & Ways and Means Committees

Position: Favorable

March 26, 2024

Strong Schools Maryland exists to advocate, build power, and share resources with invested Marylanders to co-create strong public schools whose graduates are equipped to thrive. This year, our 2024 legislative priorities include *Fortify the Blueprint*, which is necessary to ensure that the realities of implementation are accounted for in statutes related to the law. To that end, **we are happy to support Senate Bill 161: Community Schools–Alterations.**

This bill does several things:

- Reinstates language codifying national best practices in Community Schools implementation, which was stripped from the 2019 bill (now Chapter 529) before passage;
- Provides some flexibility in the use of Concentration of Poverty grant dollars to local education agencies with fewer than 40 qualifying schools, to support local coordination of the strategy and provide support to Community School Coordinators;
- Directs schools to equitably allocate funding to address identified school community needs as a part of the needs and assets assessment developed at the individual school level; and
- Requires greater transparency and appropriate collaboration between MSDE and local school systems in the development, approval, and evaluation of Community Schools implementation

We are also supportive of several forthcoming sponsor amendments to the bill, which will: further clarify the scope of AIB and MSDE's authority in the conduction of needs and assets assessments, approval of implementation plans, and public reporting on the use of reserved Concentration of Poverty grant program funds; and establish reporting timelines for schools in the various stages of Community School implementation and evaluation, on a sustainable 3-4 year cycle.

In the course of our work this past year, engaging, educating, and –most importantly– learning from those directly impacted by Blueprint implementation, a clear need for the various provisions of this bill has been made evident.

At this moment, when state and local leaders are wavering in their commitment to the Blueprint, the legislature must do all it can to support the success of students and school communities as the law is implemented. This bill represents how much we prioritize a continuous improvement model for one of the largest aspects of Blueprint investment, with no additional fiscal impact posed.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 161.

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