

MARYLAND COALITION TO REFORM SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

HB 879

TASK FORCE TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE AND REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN SCHOOLS MARCH 27, 2025

POSITION: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

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.¹ CRSD respectfully requests a favorable report with amendments regarding HB 879, which would establish the Task Force to Improve Attendance and Reduce Chronic Absenteeism in Schools to study and recommend practices that identify, prevent and eliminate chronic absenteeism by Maryland students and require the Task Force to issue a report on December 31, 2025.

Seven years ago, pursuant to HB 429, The Morgan State University published the report "Winning Strategies on the War against Habitual Student Truancy," which is full of recommendations to address truancy across Maryland.² We appreciate that HB 879 seeks to create a taskforce to address to improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism in schools. We want to see action result from this bill and the report it requires. CRSD would ask the committee to consider that the aforementioned report took approximately 18 months to produce, and more time might be needed in order for the produce a quality report.

¹ CRSD has five guiding principles.

1. We are committed to the fair and equitable treatment of ALL students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and socio-economic status, and reducing barriers to learning for ALL students.
2. We vow to work to eliminate any barriers to learning for students listed above.
3. We are committed to ensuring Maryland schools use exclusionary discipline only as a last resort and use alternatives whenever possible.
4. We are committed to advocating for the use of restorative practices in Maryland schools.
5. We imagine a broader vision of school safety, without punitive measures. We believe Maryland schools should be free of police. Working towards this goal, we will limit the power of the police to use school discipline.

² Maryland Task Force to Combat Habitual Student Truancy. "(Dec. 20, 2017). " "Winning Strategies on the War against Habitual Student Truancy," Available at https://lipa.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_08fb244f-813b-4748-8759-facfd3c2ddd1/

As the aforementioned report explains, truancy can have multiple root causes and solutions should be informed by a multidisciplinary perspective. Therefore, CRSD recommends that HB 879 be amended to ensure that the following perspectives are included in the Task Force:

- Maryland Transit authority
- Direct community-based service providers who focus on school attendance
- Expertise assisting with the social and economic factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism, such as mental health providers, case managers for families experiencing homelessness, and substance use disorder treatment providers.
- The experiences of students with Individualized Education Program (IEP) plans and 504 plans
- The experiences of Superintendents and parents from rural, suburban and urban communities

Regarding the data that will be acquired and shared pursuant to HB 879, CRSD urges transparency by requiring that the Task Force disclose the data it acquires to the public in a de-identified way. This disclosure will help families and communities partner with the government towards the common goal of helping Maryland students get to school everyday.

Finally, CRSD recommends that HB879 be amended to ensure that the Task Force is sufficiently informed about the unintended consequences related to attendance data collection of students who belong to communities who are impacted by local and federal law enforcement. Solving the problem of chronic absenteeism is important, but the collection, storage, and disclosure of student data must be carefully executed to protect vulnerable Maryland students and their families.

We urge a favorable with amendments report to HB 879.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our input. For more information, please contact the Maryland Coalition to Reform School Discipline at CRSDMaryland@gmail.com.

CRSD Members:

Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts at the University of
Baltimore School of Law
Maryland Office of the Public Defender
Progressive Maryland
The Choice Program at UMBC
ACLU of Maryland
Public Justice Center
Disability Rights Maryland