



OF BALTIMORE

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Ways and Means Committee

To: Chair Jheanelle Wilkins and Members of the Ways and Means Committee

From: Demaune A. Millard, President & CEO, Family League

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Testimony in Support of HB297 GED Option Pilot Program Expansion and MDiplomaWorks Pathway

Chair Wilkins and Distinguished Members:

Family League of Baltimore urges a **favorable report on HB297**, legislation that creates practical pathways to graduation for Maryland students who need them most.

Why This Matters Now

Right now, thousands of Maryland young people are caught in a dangerous gap. Research from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health shows that 13% of Baltimore youth ages 16–24—over 8,000 young people—are disconnected from both school and work. These aren't just statistics—they represent young people at heightened risk for poverty, justice involvement, and a lifetime of diminished opportunity. The current GED Option Pilot serves only English language learners, leaving thousands of other students without flexible pathways to graduation.

The four-year graduation rate in Baltimore City lags the state average by 10 percentage points. Behind that gap are students balancing work to support families, young parents managing childcare, justice-involved youth seeking fresh starts, and learners whose potential traditional classrooms haven't unlocked. Without intervention, these young people face a devastating trajectory: each year of disconnection compounds into long-term unemployment, chronic poverty, and significantly higher rates of justice system involvement.

What HB297 Does

This legislation provides two evidence-based solutions:

1. **Expands the GED Option Pilot** beyond English language learners to serve all students facing economic instability, family obligations, and system involvement
2. **Creates the MDiplomaWorks pathway**, blending academic instruction with career-focused learning so students graduate with both diplomas and workforce-ready skills

Critically, the bill requires the Maryland Department of Labor to establish rigorous selection criteria for participating school systems—ensuring quality implementation, not just access.

Why Family League Supports This Approach

For 30 years, Family League has worked across public agencies and community partners to build cradle-to-career support systems. Through our Thriving Youth Strategy, we've seen what happens when young people gain access to flexible, responsive pathways.

Our investments demonstrate the urgency—Through partnerships with Baltimore Brothers, Mayor's Office of African American Male Engagement (MOAAME), New Vision Youth Services, and the Choice Program, Family League's Thriving Youth Strategy serves justice-involved and at-risk youth ages 11-17. **In FY2025, 78% of New Vision participants maintained or gained connection to work or school**—significantly exceeding targets and preventing the disconnection that correlates with dropout and

justice involvement. **Baltimore Brothers exceeded participation targets for three consecutive years, growing from 60 to 94 participants annually** by providing intensive mentorship and education advocacy precisely when traditional structures fail young people.

MOAAME's Guided Curriculum program engaged 82% of school-aged youth in FY2025, providing culturally responsive programming that addresses identity development, conflict resolution, and community leadership.

These results prove what HB297 recognizes: educational success isn't linear, and pathways must meet students where they are.

The Return on Investment—Breaking the Cycle of Disconnection

The over 8,000 disconnected youth in Baltimore represent not just individual tragedies, but a massive economic burden we can prevent. Research from the Job Opportunities Task Force and national studies on opportunity youth show that every young person who remains disconnected from school and work costs Maryland taxpayers \$235,000 over their lifetime in lost tax revenue and increased public services. Multiply that across Baltimore's disconnected youth population, and we're looking at nearly \$1.9 billion in long-term costs—costs that are entirely preventable through strategic intervention.

But the human costs dwarf the fiscal ones. Youth disconnected from school and employment face dramatically higher risks of justice system involvement, creating a pipeline from educational failure to incarceration. Baltimore's historic 2025 crime reductions—homicides at a 50-year low—resulted partly from upstream investments in youth engagement through programs like Family League's Thriving Youth Strategy. HB297 strengthens this prevention infrastructure by ensuring students don't fall through the gap between traditional school models and complete disconnection.

The economic argument becomes even more compelling when we consider Maryland's workforce needs. According to recent employer surveys, 71% of employers now require postsecondary credentials or degrees for entry-level positions (Cengage Report 2025), yet students without high school diplomas cannot access the training programs that lead to these jobs. This creates a permanent underclass of young people locked out of economic mobility. The MDiplomaWorks pathway breaks this cycle by connecting graduation directly to employment readiness, ensuring Maryland's young people can access the credentials employers demand while building our state's workforce pipeline.

Investing in HB297 isn't just the right thing to do—it's the fiscally responsible choice. Every dollar we spend creating flexible pathways to graduation saves exponentially more in avoided justice system costs, public assistance, and lost economic productivity. More importantly, it transforms lives and strengthens communities.

Our Ask

Recognizing there are multiple pathways to graduation that aren't lowering the bar—but rather removing barriers for all students who need them—HB297 ensures that a student's circumstances don't determine their future.

Family League respectfully urges a favorable report and stands ready to support implementation efforts that will change trajectories for Maryland's young people. Thank you for your leadership on behalf of the children, youth, and families who are counting on us.

Respectfully submitted,
Demaune A. Millard
President & CEO, Family League of Baltimore

Sources:

[Bloomberg American Health Initiative](#), Johns Hopkins (2023); Job Opportunities Task Force, "[Economic Impact of Opportunity Youth in Maryland](#)" (2016, 2018); Belfield et al., "[The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth](#)," Corporation for National and Community Service (2012); [Cengage Group, Inside Higher Ed](#) (2025); Family League FY2025 Performance Reports; Mayor Brandon M. Scott [press releases](#) (2026).