

January 29, 2020

Testimony from Roy Roomer to Budget and Taxation Committee

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Budget and Taxation Committee.

I bring three types of experience to the discussion about this tax and the educational goals it supports. I served as an elected official, in the legislature, as state Treasurer, and as Governor of Colorado. I also served as the executive responsible for managing the Los Angeles Unified School District, America's second largest. Finally, I have run, bought, sold, and operated many types of business. One of these, a network of John Deere dealerships, now has over a billion dollars in sales each year.

From the perspectives of all three parts of my career -- as an elected official, as the superintendent of a school district, and as the owner of small and large businesses -- I know firsthand that we are making investments in education and infrastructure that are totally inadequate at every level of government in this country. That's why I applaud the State of Maryland for prioritizing education by committing to the recommendations of the Kirwan Commission, and backing that commitment with the funding that it requires.

As an elected official, but particularly as a business person, I know that education is the single most important investment a government can make. The key to success in the businesses I ran was always to recruit employees who were willing and able to keep learning as our world changed.

As a former superintendent of a school system, I know how hard it is to improve the quality of an education system. Over the years I've had to fix a lot of problems and manage a lot of people. Years ago, I learned that money alone rarely fixes a problem, and that fixing problems is not the same as making steady progress. I agree that voters and their representatives must insist that public employees keep striving for efficiencies, for new and better ways to do their jobs. But as a business person, I know that only in the world of magical thinking can any organization or system live up to new responsibilities like making high quality preschool available to many more 3 and 4 year olds without any new funding. The Kirwan Commission plan is ambitious yet realistic, but the state of Maryland will be able to implement it only if it uses measures like the tax bill you are considering today to provide additional revenue to its educational system.

Finally, let me say that in the technology sector, just as in my own businesses, the supply of well educated workers is the key to success. If the firms that lead this sector are genuinely committed to sustained innovation, they will admit that a supply of better prepared and better educated workers will be worth far more to them than the small taxes they will pay to get it. I know that everyone wants someone else to be the one who pays for the benefits that a better educational system will yield. Now is the time for everyone to step up and make their contribution to the future, not just of our economy, but of our nation.

Thank you.