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Testimony before the Maryland House Appropriations Committee on HB1113

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Chairwoman McIntosh and members of the Committee:

My name is Tim Benson, a policy analyst with The Heartland Institute, a 35-year-old independent, national, nonprofit organization whose mission is to discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions to social and economic problems. Heartland is headquartered in Illinois and focuses on providing national, state, and local elected officials with reliable and timely research and analyses on important policy issues. Heartland would like to submit the following testimony regarding HB 1113 and education savings accounts.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Maryland's public schools and the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA) are failing Maryland's children. Test scores certainly prove it.

The latest scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also colloquially known as the "Nation's Report Card," show only [35 percent](#) of Old Line State fourth graders were proficient to grade level in reading in 2019, while only [37 percent](#) of eighth graders tested the same. In mathematics, only [39 percent](#) of fourth graders tested proficient, while just [32 percent](#) of eighth graders tested likewise.

NAEP scores for Baltimore City schoolchildren were even more atrocious. Only [12 percent](#) of Baltimore fourth graders tested proficient in reading, and just [14 percent](#) of eighth graders. Math proficiency scores were [15 percent](#) for fourth graders and just [10 percent](#) for eighth graders.

"Well, that's just one test," you may say, but scores for tests administered by the State of Maryland itself are no better.

The [2019 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program \(MCAP\) test results](#) show only 43 percent of Maryland

students in grades 3–8 are proficient to grade level in English language arts (ELA). Even worse, only 33 percent were proficient in math.

In Baltimore City Public Schools, only 19 percent of students were proficient in ELA and just 14 percent were proficient in math. Baltimore County Public Schools fared little better, with just 36 percent proficient in ELA and 26 percent in math. Statewide, math scores dropped for grades 5–8, as did Algebra I scores for high school students. At 61 percent proficient, Worcester County led the state for ELA scores, while Carroll County led in math scores with 53 percent proficient. Thirteen of Maryland’s 23 counties, including Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Frederick, Hartford, and Howard saw a decrease in their math scores from last year’s test. No county saw their math scores increase.

Digging deeper into the MCAP data, only 28 percent of black students in grades 3–8 tested proficient in ELA, and just 16 percent in math. The scores of Hispanic students statewide mirrored these results. Just 29 percent tested proficient in ELA, and 20 percent in math.

The results of these tests show Maryland public schools are failing to educate to grade level six out of every 10 students in their charge in ELA, and seven out of 10 in math. The atrocious results from Maryland public schools are unacceptable and highlights the need for a stark and immediate change from the status quo.

Maryland public schools need competition. Moreover, Maryland families need more education options, especially as the MSEA continues to do everything in their power to make sure most Maryland students can’t attend their schools in person, even though there is [no consistent link](#) between school re-openings and increased rates of COVID-19 infection. These goals could be achieved by establishing more private education choice options such as an education savings account (ESA) program as provided by [HB 1113](#).

If HB 1113 were to pass, ESAs would be made available to children attending a Maryland public school and the children of active duty military personnel residing in the state to pay for tuition, curriculum, and fees at private and parochial schools. The funds could also be used to pay for textbooks, uniforms, tutoring services, instructional materials, online courses, and educational therapies and services. The ESAs could also be used to cover the fees required to take national standardized achievement tests, such as the SAT or ACT.

Accounts would be funded at 25 percent of the “per pupil amount of state and local funds for each education program in the resident school district for which the eligible student would be included in the enrollment count for [budget] calculations” under state law for those students living in households with incomes below 500 percent of the federal poverty level. For those families with incomes above 500 percent of the federal poverty level, funding would be 18.75 percent.

[Copious empirical research](#) on [school choice programs](#) such as ESAs finds they offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children’s unique needs and circumstances, and that these programs [improve academic performance and attainment](#) and deliver a quality education at [lower cost](#) than traditional public schools. Additionally, these

programs [benefit public school students](#) and taxpayers by increasing competition, [decreasing segregation](#), and [improving civic values and practices](#).

Research also shows students at private schools are [less likely](#) than their public school peers to experience problems such as alcohol abuse, bullying, drug use, fighting, gang activity, racial tension, theft, vandalism, and weapon-based threats, all of which are a problem in Maryland's public schools.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) [2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System \(YRBSS\)](#), 16.7 percent of Maryland high school students were bullied on school property in 2019, while 13.5 percent of Maryland high school students reported being cyberbullied.

Another 12 percent reported being in a fight on school property in 2019, with 7.8 percent reporting they were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. Disturbingly, 9.2 percent reported skipping school at least once in the last 30 days due to concerns for their safety. Even more disturbingly, 18 percent of Maryland high school students said they had seriously considered attempting suicide.

Along with all the other empirical benefits provided by education choice programs, there is also a [strong causal link](#) suggesting these programs improve the mental health of participating students.

It is probably for these reasons, and also because teacher unions like MSEA have repeatedly played politics with school closings during the COVID-19 pandemic in direct conflict with students' best interests, that ESAs are more popular with parents than ever before. Polling done by EdChoice released in December 2020 found [81 percent support](#) for ESAs among the general public and 86 percent among current school parents, the highest level of support the program has received in the organization's eight years of polling on the issue. This represents a 4-percentage point increase over 2019. These findings are mirrored in the American Federation for Children's seventh-annual [National School Choice Poll](#), released in January 2021, which saw 78 percent support for ESA programs.

The school a child attends should not be determined solely by his or her ZIP code. However, this is currently the case for most children in Maryland. The proposed ESA program would be the perfect first step in bringing choice options to Old Line State families.

The goal of public education in the Maryland today and in the years to come should be to allow all parents to choose which schools their children attend, require every school to compete for every student who walks through its doors, and make sure every child has the opportunity to attend a quality school. There has not been a time when providing these opportunities has been more urgent and more needed than right now. Legislators should recognize that and allow families as many options as possible to get their children the education they need and deserve.

Thank you for your time.

For more information about The Heartland Institute's work, please visit our Web site at www.heartland.org or <http://news.heartland.org>, or contact our Government Relations Department at 312/377-4000 or reach them by email at governmentrelations@heartland.org.