



House Bill 717

Education – Technology Resources – Funding (Ending the Digital Divide Act)

MACo Position: **OPPOSE**

To: Appropriations and Ways and Means
Committees

Date: March 11, 2021

From: Drew Jabin

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **OPPOSES** HB 717. This bill targets education funding to address connectivity issues to support current and ongoing remote schooling offerings. This bill would require county boards of education to designate funds to provide digital tools for students, effectively creating an unfunded mandate.

While counties agree that addressing and eliminating the digital divide is a worthy and pressing cause, mandating the details of how county governments and school systems appropriate education funding is an overstep of state authority on local autonomy. Further, the bill does not clearly address how the additional funding would affect ongoing maintenance of effort requirements, potentially creating dramatic fiscal effects after abatement of short-term funds.

HB 717 would mandate local school boards use at least 7% of the target per pupil funding to provide students with laptops, internet connectivity, technical assistance, and information technology software. This state funding for public schools is set via a formula. Adding new and costly mandated expenses to the required school program belies the lengthy debates regarding these adequacy figures. Counties have no choice but to support these new costs — competing for limited local funds against school construction, public safety, roadway maintenance, and other essential public services. If federal funds are a potential resource for the services envisioned in HB 717, legislation to prioritize these functions as a part of locally developed plans could be a more appropriate state-local partnership. HB 717 creates the funding requirement, but without true assurances that federal funds will necessarily be available to satisfy that vision.

Amidst a broad-based re-thinking of Maryland's education priorities under the Kirwan Blueprint legislation, HB 717 introduces a substantial new mandated cost fully outside the basis for that new vision for school funding. Connectivity and related equity issues are a worthy topic – one that MACo has adopted as a top legislative priority for the 2021 session. However, the HB 717 framework precludes flexibility and leaves future funding sources in doubt. Accordingly, MACo **OPPOSES** HB 717 and requests an **UNFAVORABLE** report.