



## The Maryland School for the Blind

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February 24, 2021

The Honorable Guy Guzzone, Chair  
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee  
Miller Senate Office Building – 3 West Wing  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Senator Guzzone:

RE: SB720/HB1054

We write to provide testimony in favor of SB720/HB1054 Education – Maryland School for the Blind – Pay Plan.

The Maryland School for the Blind (“MSB” or “the School”) was established in 1853 to educate Maryland’s blind and low vision students. MSB provides vital services to more than a thousand students representing every jurisdiction in the state through outreach and on-campus school programs and serves students with a wide array of multiple disabilities in addition to their blindness.

Despite growth in state funding, MSB faces critical financial challenges that if not resolved threaten the School’s long-term ability to carry out its essential mission.

A study requested by the budget committees conducted in 2019 showed that MSB’s financial difficulties are primarily the result of a gradual shift to a more complex student population. In 1975 approximately 30% of the students had multiple disabilities whereas today the percentage is 96%.

Our students have many needs. Some are medically fragile, totally dependent on adults for all self-care needs including toileting, bathing and dressing; some cannot eat without assistance; some have significant behavioral challenges such as biting, scratching, overturning furniture and eloping from the classroom; some are unable to speak or use a computer to speak; some have physical disabilities and use a wheelchair or walking support equipment, all in addition to their visual impairment.

Because the funding formula model has not kept pace with the operational needs for this complex student population, the School has had to implement cost containment strategies. These include leaving positions unfilled, not increasing the number of FTEs, decreasing health insurance benefits for staff and, in some cases, paying wages far below market value.

Though the formula calculation for the base grant is identical to the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD), funding is 15% lower per pupil, or \$8,400, for MSB than the Maryland School for the Deaf, resulting in \$3.6 million funding disparity between the two schools.

This stands out because the needs of MSB students are more complex than those enrolled at MSD and require a greater level of service and staffing due to their multiple disabilities.

MSB Paraprofessionals are paid 30% less than their Baltimore County Public School counterparts, leading to difficulty in recruiting and retaining these essential staff.

Though MSB has a high percentage of students who are residential, there is no differentiation in funding for residential services, which are more expensive.

There is no mechanism in the education statutes for MSB to fund salary or cost of living increases as there is for the School for the Deaf (The “pay plan” statute Ed. Art. § 8-3A-10).

This legislative proposal tracks similar language in the Code applicable to the Maryland School for the Deaf.

Senate Bill 720 (and House Bill 1054) is needed to address the failure of the State budget to keep pace with the compensation requirements for staff and the increased costs of a changing student population at the Maryland School for the Blind.

The impact of those costs were detailed in reports prepared by the MSB pursuant to Joint Chairman’s Report requests in 2019 and 2020, submitted to the House and Senate budget committees, respectively.

The MSB has been particularly impacted by its inability to pay Paraeducators at a rate similar to their counterparts in Baltimore County, as well as the inability to hire appropriate level of staffing to address the significant needs of our students.

This bill is potentially a significant step to ensuring parity between the Maryland School for the Deaf and the Maryland School for the Blind. Your thoughtful approach will allow the state to begin the process to address the funding disparities identified in MSB’s JCR reports.

The consequences of not changing the funding structure would be MSB reducing services and cutting essential programs to Maryland’s students. This would have a direct negative impact on Maryland’s vulnerable, medically fragile, blind students and their families.

Without the School's services, these students would be at greater risk of being transferred to more expensive out-of-state programs, such as Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts (which can exceed \$394,000 annually), and be separated from their families and communities.

I would like to thank Senator Zucker and Delegate Barnes for sponsoring this bill. We appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of this legislation and look forward to working together with State leadership to ensure that not only this generation, but future generations to come, have the availability of a free appropriate public education through the services of the Maryland School for the blind.

W. Robert Hair, Superintendent  
The Maryland School for the Blind