

BILL: **SB 966 - Virtual Schools – Statewide Education Platform – Procurement and Establishment**

SPONSOR: **Senator Katie Fry Hester**

POSITION: **FAVORABLE**

Friday, March 26, 2021

SB 966

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, we are writing in favor of SB0966 - Virtual Schools Statewide Education Platform.

Our most vulnerable black, brown and poor students are falling through the cracks. We see it with our own eyes in our communities, and it is reaffirmed in the news. It is the black, brown and poor students who are not appearing online. Without the structure of the classroom, they are struggling to direct their own learning. Their parents or guardians often lack the time or capacity to support their learning. Many times, there is not enough connectivity to reliably access online instruction. Time for learning is devoted instead to trying to secure food. Immigrant families who often rent just a room or a closet lack the protections against eviction afforded to those with formal lease agreements. Heightened forced distancing has made them uniquely vulnerable to being put out onto the streets. Thus, in these critical times, it is imperative to see investment in education as an investment in our State's economic and overall recovery. These are NOT mutually exclusive; they are critically intertwined. Relief stemming from the State must include education support for our most vulnerable students.

Despite deep commitment and exhaustive effort by the Maryland State Department of Education to establish continuity of learning, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has aggravated long existing racial and ethnic inequities and socio-economic risk factors, rendering it extremely challenging, if not impossible, for many of our black, brown and poor students to learn. Left unaddressed, this learning loss resulting from COVID-19 will set us back profoundly in our equity commitment. We risk undermining decades of investment and efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps for black and brown students. In order to evade the crippling effects of this pandemic, our response must be immediate, and our response must be aggressive; we must continue to reimagine and reinvent a system which does not serve every student equally. The Maryland Student Coalition (MSC) believes it to be unequivocally imperative that the State Board of Education be granted authorization to make a procurement on an expedited basis, and as such, have the much needed jurisdiction to facilitate virtual school operation on a

year round basis. A universalized and solidified system will serve as the foundation for much needed accountability, and will most importantly ensure the establishment of extended learning opportunity programs for students across the state. Extended learning time will bridge the disconnect between students who have immensely suffered academically during the pandemic and their counterparts, ensuring that no student, regardless of race or economic background, will be left behind.

For the reasons stated above, we urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 0966.