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Senator Paul G. Pinsky
Chair, Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Remarks of
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Support of: SB0934 - Public Schools - Purple Star Schools Program – Establishment

Testimony

Chairman Pinsky and honorable Committee members, the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in SB0934, an act concerning Purple Star Schools, which addresses the need to alleviate the challenges military connected students face due to constant moves during their K-12 education years.

My name is Christopher Arnold. I am the Northeast Region Liaison at the United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for troops and their families' welfare by harmonizing state and federal law and regulation on policy problems of national significance. These are identified by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Military Departments, and the National Guard Bureau as areas where states can play a crucial role.

With each move, military service members face numerous challenges as they bring their spouses and children to resettle into new communities and attend new schools. Mobile military students face issues such as gaps and overlaps in curriculum, different graduation requirements, course placement disruption, and many other hurdles when changing schools. Besides the academic issues, these students also face social and emotional challenges of relocation, such as leaving supportive social networks and activities, to start new again.

Purple Star Schools are military-friendly schools that have demonstrated a major commitment to students and families connected to our nation's military. Designated schools have met specific state designed requirements to support the unique situations facing military students and their families.

The Department is hopeful Maryland will soon join the eleven states that have established a statewide Purple Star School policy since 2017. A study of four such programs by the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University reported that the Purple Star program is anchored by two parallel goals: (1) building and recognizing the capacity of schools

and districts to serve military-connected students and families; and (2) helping families identify the schools and districts that are best prepared to meet their needs.¹

The report noted that as a local opt-in, the Purple Star program already gained traction with hundreds of school districts. While the majority of these districts already had programming in place for military-connected students before seeking the formal designation, staff and faculty indicated “they have benefitted from the Purple Star application process and the encouragement to refine and expand programming related to the program designation requirements.”²

As our military members and their families move from state to state, providing for a smooth educational transition for their children is key to eliminating one of the largest concerns the parents face. Purple Star is of course, a bottom-up initiative that has no central governing body. Thus, DoD has identified as a best practice that states utilize their discretion to design and administer a statewide version of the program, to ensure efficaciousness through research-driven components, such as those set forth in SB0934:

- Designated Point-of-Contact: Maryland’s Purple Star schools will appoint a staff member to act as a liaison between military families and the school, easing military-connected students’ enrollment and acclimation period;
- Professional Development: Maryland’s Purple Star schools will train staff on the unique considerations for and needs of military-connected students;
- Dedicated Webpage: Maryland’s Purple Star schools may develop a dedicated page on the school or district website with easily accessible information and resources for military-connected families;
- Transition Programs: Maryland’s Purple Star schools will implement a transition program to welcome and socially acclimate incoming military-connected students; and
- Military Recognition Events: Maryland’s Purple Star schools will host, at least once per year, programming and events to celebrate and honor service members and military-connected students, families, and community members.

Subject-matter experts from the education department and the Maryland MIC3 retain discretion, through rulemaking, to further tailor the program to local requirements and needs to ensure equal opportunity to earn the designation for schools with varying levels of resources.

In the CPRL study, “Seventy-seven percent of schools report that the program has had a “positive” or “very positive” impact on the school overall, with no schools reporting a “negative” or “very negative” outcome. Further, 77 percent observe that the program has specifically helped improve their relationships with military-connected families, again with no schools reporting a negative impact.”³ “Fifty-seven percent and 53 percent of schools link an improvement in their students’ social-emotional development and academic experience to Purple Star programming, with no schools reporting a detrimental impact. Though a close to half of respondents noted no

¹ Columbia Law School Center for Public Research and Leadership. *A Study of the Purple Star School Designation Program: Summary Report*. January 4, 2021. Retrieved from <https://cpri.law.columbia.edu/content/study-purple-star-school-designation-program-summary-report>

² *Id.* p. 1

³ *Id.* p. 31

change, this is likely partially attributable to the fact that many schools had Purple Star-required programming in place before earning the designation.”⁴

In a set of parallel surveys aimed at families, “broadly speaking, a majority of families reported having better experiences at Purple Star schools than at non-designated institutions. Fifty-seven percent of parents and 50 percent of students noted that their experience at a designated school had been better than their experiences at non-designated institutions. This result is particularly notable in light of the fact that many families were reporting on Purple Star schools that they had only attended remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions.”⁵ Parents also reported that Purple Star programming had a positive social-emotional impact on their children.”⁶

The clarity and precision derived from Maryland communicating clear expectations and responsibilities at the state level ensures standardization and creates consistency as the program scales and families move more frequently between Purple Star schools, even to and from other states.

DoD recommends a state-level implementation effort to ensure that designated schools act with reasonable fidelity, provide models for core components including feedback to applicant schools that miss the mark, develop measurement systems to evaluate Purple Star impact, and leverage the program to establish formal networks.

As Maryland is already home to 35,660 active-duty service members, 15,092 active duty spouses and 30,121 active duty children as of 2020, it has the benefit of being able to draw upon existing expertise and engagement with existing stakeholders.⁷ Purple Star also creates an opportunity for military-impacted schools to bridge the gap between educators and evaluators of granular K-12 metrics utilized in basing decisions by the military services, such as the Department of the Air Force.⁸

Maryland SB0934 will help schools aggregate and centralize knowledge so that critical information is easily accessible to students, families, faculty and staff. The legislation gives Maryland the potential to create a robust network of local, state, and national stakeholders and cultivate competency in the area of military-connected student transition, offering Maryland’s Purple Star Schools the opportunity to demonstrate their cultural fluency to parents and families.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Id.* p. 32

⁶ *Ibid.*

“Of particular interest is the notable difference between parents whose children had attended a Purple Star school and those who had not: 77 percent of parents in Purple Star schools were satisfied with their children’s social-emotional experience, compared to just 54 percent of their peers in non-designated schools. This result is echoed in the student data: 61 percent of students reported that they felt welcomed when they first started attending their Purple Star school. These results suggest that designated schools are offering strong social-emotional support.”

⁷ DMDC, Dec. 31, 2019.

⁸ Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission. *2020 Annual Business Meeting Minutes*. p. 13. Thursday, October 1, 2020. Retrieved from https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-ABM-MINUTES_DAY1-DRAFT.pdf

In closing, let me say that we are grateful to Senator Peters for sponsoring this important legislation and to each of you for the tremendous effort that Maryland has historically given in supporting our Service members and their families. On behalf of the Department of Defense, we thank you for considering the establishment of a Purple Star School Program as espoused in SB0934 and respectfully pray for your favorable report of this bill.

A Maryland Purple Star School is not only a badge of honor for the school and district, it is a recognition of effort that signals to incoming families that they will be welcomed and well-supported.

Yours etc.,

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