

BILL: Senate Bill 966
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Education - Requirements
DATE: March 30, 2021
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) appreciates the intent of Senate Bill 966 to establish a framework for a robust statewide approach to ensuring access for all students to high quality virtual learning. However, given the status of local school system actions to procure learning management systems and the State’s recent procurement of a learning management system for the Maryland State Department of Education, MABE requests several amendments.

First, MABE appreciates the bill’s focus on value of learning management systems in delivering high quality virtual learning. Local school system have been procuring such platforms during the pandemic and in preparation for robust virtual learning programs going forward. Similarly, the Board of Public Works recently approved the State’s recent procurement of a learning management system for the Maryland State Department of Education. Senate Bill 966 is largely consistent with these initiatives and, importantly, continues to provide ample discretion to local school systems relative to utilizing the State platform. MABE also appreciates the references to quality standards and the need for grant-funded professional development.

MABE has identified several concerns and with sections of the bill pertaining to conditions on student eligibility for enrollment in virtual schools, defining the teacher certification and bargaining unit membership of teachers using the State platform, and the mandate for policies establish parental choice-based virtual schools into the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated widespread home-based virtual learning and has highlighted a long-documented and persistent inequity of students that lack adequate broadband access. This digital divide, commonly known as the homework gap, impacts millions of students across the nation, and families and students in each of Maryland’s 24 local jurisdictions and school systems. The equity issues arising from virtual learning must continue to be of the highest priority in crafting a new statewide approach to virtual learning.

As the instructional environment for students has shifted from traditional classrooms in school buildings to virtual classrooms, the necessity for each student to have high-quality access to the internet is imperative. In 2021, MABE is supporting legislation, such as House Bill 97, the “Digital Connectivity Act of 2021,” legislation essential to Maryland’s efforts to improve necessary high-speed broadband required for twenty-first century learning both when students are school and when they are home. Maryland’s local boards of education are also urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Congress to focus on ways to improve the overall connectivity and digital infrastructure for all students and abandon efforts to make connectivity more difficult.

Closing the homework gap is a pressing national need that must also be addressed through reforms to federal laws and regulations so that all students have equitable access to Maryland's world class public education system. Therefore, MABE and local boards across the nation are enthusiastic about the benefits to students flowing from the \$7.2 billion in digital equity and access funding provided in the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 966 with amendments to address the concerns outlined above.