



The Senate of Maryland
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401-1991

**SB 785 - State Board of Education Membership and Terms - Capability and Capacity Study of
Education Agencies**

Testimony of Senate President Bill Ferguson

On February 25, 2021

Before the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Why This Bill Matters:

The COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions to our education system have caused an immeasurable impact on Maryland students throughout the State. Since the beginning of school building closures in March of 2020, Maryland students, parents, teachers and staff, and school district leaders have looked to the Maryland State Board of Education for clear guidance and a cohesive strategy. The State Board of Education has failed to provide that leadership.

A report authored by the Teaching Systems Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology released in April of 2020 ranked Maryland last in the country when examining guidance to local school districts from state departments of education. The impacts of the lack of leadership from the State Board of Education and Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) have been felt ever since.

Although these disruptions to our education system and student outcomes were unavoidable given the circumstances, they could have been mitigated with a more effective State Board of Education composed of members possessing varied expertise in running a thorough and efficient system of free public education. Right now, the qualification requirements for nominees to serve on the State Board of Education is largely silent on that expertise. The Maryland General Assembly must fix that.

Further, as Maryland begins the hard work of implementing the Blueprint for Maryland's Future with accountability and fidelity, it is time to examine MSDE to determine if its current structure is sufficient to meet the task that the Maryland General Assembly has presented. True implementation of the Blueprint will require cross-agency coordination with strong guidance given to local school districts as they begin implementation.

If the last few months were any indication, a comprehensive study to determine necessary reforms is a vital next step.

What This Bill Does:

State Board of Education Reform

Senate Bill 785 is an emergency bill that adds a number of qualifications to membership of the State Board of Education to ensure that members have a wide range of expertise including, but not limited to: successful management of a large organization; support for students with disabilities; instructional support for multilingual students; and innovation in public education. Additionally, it mandates that the Governor make his appointments before January 1 of the year in which a member's term expires to ensure sufficient time for Senate confirmation prior to the new term beginning.

Blueprint for Maryland's Future Agency Study

Senate Bill 785 also tasks the Accountability and Implementation Board, in consultation with the Department of Legislative Services, to contract with a consultant to examine the capability and capacity of the Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Higher Education Commission, and Maryland Department of Labor to successfully do their part to implement the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. State agencies have a critical role to play in ensuring the Blueprint is applied with accountability, and we must do our part to ensure they have the structure and resources to succeed in that task.

Why You Should Vote For This Bill:

Maryland students, parents, and teachers deserve better and more consistent leadership from the State in the best of times, and certainly in the middle of a once-in-a-generation pandemic. The challenges faced by the Maryland State Board of Education and Department of Education underscore the importance of leadership with true expertise in the systems they are supposed to be running.

For our local school districts to successfully serve their student populations, our statewide education entity must have a focused vision based on experience and proficiency. The road ahead will only become more challenging as we set out to transform public education in Maryland and the General Assembly must ensure the membership, skills, and support necessary to achieve that goal.

Fundamentally, Senate Bill 785 puts the State Board of Education, MSDE, and all other related state agencies on a path to meeting and exceeding those expectations.

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 785 and I urge the committee to move this bill with a favorable report.

4/22/20 Balt. Sun (Pg. Unavail. Online)
2020 WLNR 11468083

Baltimore Sun (MD)
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April 22, 2020

**A slow start to coronavirus distance-learning
for schools in Maryland | COMMENTARY**

Baltimore Sun Editorial Board; The Baltimore Sun

April 22--If there's one thing we've learned from the novel coronavirus sweeping the globe, it's that swift action is critical to not only stem the spread of the virus, but to adequately prepare for life amid stay-home orders and business shutdowns, as well as whatever comes beyond. Americans who stockpiled toilet paper in early March, to mockery from the rest of us, for example, are rightfully smug today.

But while Maryland has largely been a leader in U.S. pandemic preparedness, forming an early team of medical advisors and declaring a state of emergency a week before the president, there's one area in which we lagged behind: the so-called "distance learning" that's supposed to stand in for our children's classroom education.

A report released earlier this month by the Teaching Systems Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology showed that Maryland was slow to offer certain guidance regarding remote education in the final days of March -- a critical time when all 50 states had shuttered public schools at least temporarily in an effort to slow the infection rate (Maryland closed its schools on March 16th). Of 21 criteria outlined in the report, "Remote Learning Guidance from State Education Agencies During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A First Look," Maryland had met only three by March 31, coming in dead last.

Texas appeared the best prepared by MIT's measures, which looked at whether remote learning guidance was available, along with key recommendations for instruction, and plans for dealing with equity and access to technology issues. That state had 17 such conditions in place at the time, followed by Massachusetts, New York and Tennessee, each with 16.

Since then, Maryland has added several criteria (up to seven out of 21), and a report author has recently warned against "inferring that an absence of guidance from a particular state on a particular issue represents an absence of concern from those state policymakers."

But coming in last in the early days raises concerns about how much catch-up we're playing now, particularly as other states make longer term plans for education. At least 39 states have made the call to officially keep their school buildings closed through the remainder of the school year, focusing completely on distance learning. Thus far, Maryland has only conceded that classes will not be held before mid-May.

That paves the way for piecemeal planning. When schools were first shuttered March 16th, they were to remain closed through March 27. That was later changed to April 24th. And last week, it was changed again to May 15th. The extensions have the feel of buying time.

In a statement issued Friday, State Superintendent of Schools Karen B. Salmon said school systems will use the weeks between now and the 15th "to examine every option and continue to develop a long-term plan for recovery." They will also submit learning plans, if they haven't already, that address the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, give a sample teacher and student day, and offer a plan of accountability and professional development for staff, along with a description of how the system will handle equity issues.

We would have expected that to be happening in earnest six weeks ago, when schools were first shuttered. Twelve states had sample syllabi in place by the end of March, according to the MIT report, and 35 had statements about digital versus non-digital learning opportunities; MIT found neither in Maryland.

We understand that online education is never going to be as good as classroom learning, particularly for kids who were struggling before now, and that there are enormous difficulties in pulling together meaningful programs at a moment's notice, especially with resources and funding in flux. But the stakes could not be higher. The Maryland General Assembly spent most of the legislative session (before it, too, was cut short) driving home the need for billions-of-dollars-worth of sweeping education reform in the state and painting a dire picture of how far behind our children already are. Those kids deserve our best efforts at every point along the way; they will not get this time back.

Superintendent Salmon seems to understand the state is in for a long transitional period, even without yet shuttering schools for the academic year. In her statement, she mentions potential "plans for additional digital learning and the recovery of any lost instructional time in the form of expanding summer school programs."

We'll take that as a sign a lesson has been learned.

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News Subject: (Distance Learning (1DI85); Education (1ED85); Technology in Education (1TE07))

Industry: (Coronavirus (1CV19); Healthcare (1HE06); I.T. (1IT96); I.T. Vertical Markets (1IT38); I.T. in Education (1IT61); Infectious Diseases (1IN99); Viral (1VI15))

Region: (Americas (1AM92); Maryland (1MA47); Massachusetts (1MA15); North America (1NO39); U.S. Mid-Atlantic Region (1MI18); U.S. New England Region (1NE37); USA (1US73))

Language: EN

Other Indexing: (Baltimore Sun) (Peter Jensen; Tricia Bishop; Karen B. Salmon; Andrea K. McDaniels)

Word Count: 779

NewsRoom