

BILL: House Bill 1376
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Education - Requirements
DATE: March 17, 2021
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means Committee
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports the intent of House Bill 1376 to build a framework for a robust statewide approach to ensuring access for all students to high quality virtual learning. However, given the breadth and scope of the numerous provisions of this legislation, including the creation of new state and local virtual school programs, MABE is anticipating requests for amendments to several areas of the bill.

Specifically, MABE has identified the following issues of concern, including: the intent of the “flip the classroom” asynchronous learning system pilot, the role of the statewide universal learning management system, the distinctions between permanent and temporary virtual schools, and the need for a separate temporary virtual school administrative office and other mandated staffing provisions. Clearly, this is a comprehensive and therefore complex piece of legislation, modifying existing law which we believe provides significant authority and flexibility for local school systems to establish virtual schools. In this context, MABE looks forward to engaging constructively in the legislature’s dialogue and deliberations on this bill.

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 House Bill 1376 in the context of securing greater clarification on the extent of local flexibility to implement the provisions of the bill and the programmatic and staffing issues of concern outlined above.