

Informational Testimony regarding House Bill 1376
Primary and Secondary Education—Virtual Education—Requirements

House Ways and Means Committee

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Tina N. Dove, M.Ed.
Government Relations

The Maryland State Education Association offers this informational testimony on House Bill 1376, legislation that would (among other things): 1) require state teacher preparation programs to include training on pedagogy and best practices for teaching in a virtual space; 2) require the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to provide guidance to local school systems on professional development and support for teachers teaching virtually; 3) create the Flip the Classroom Pilot Program; and 4) allow local boards of education to transition into temporary virtual schools in the event of circumstances requiring a sustained closure of in-person schooling; and 5) allow MSDE and local boards of education to establish permanent virtual schools or learning opportunities.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

MSEA understands the overall goals of this legislation, particularly given this past year where our schools have been forced to implement alternatives to traditional in-person learning in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The haste with which our schools, educators, and students were required to pivot was unprecedented and without advance planning. There is no doubt that the initial roll out of virtual learning, coupled with the uncertainty of the duration thereof, created immeasurable challenges for all involved and was not without its adverse consequences.

But since then, our schools, educators, and students have adapted and evolved to their new reality and have shown extraordinary resilience, resourcefulness, and tenacity in the face of exceptional circumstances. We all can say that there are many lessons learned from the experience; the greatest of which is that clear leadership, coupled with honest and transparent collaboration among all involved

parties, is mission critical to success—be that in the short- or long-term of virtual learning implementation. Having a plan in place that clearly delineates operational, educational, and non-academic support logistics before a catastrophic event should be something that all local school systems put in place so as to ease any transition into abnormal school operations in the future. Since all local school systems were required to devise such plans and submit them to MSDE in the summer, much of this work has already been done. We support efforts to bring all of the applicable stakeholders together to revisit and improve upon these plans, both in response to what’s been learned during this current crisis and so as to plan for any future unforeseen circumstance. MSDE should play a role in providing clear guidance and support to local systems and school communities in this regard.

We also believe that efforts to ensure that our classroom teachers and instructional staff are provided with the training, resources, and supports required to effectively teach in a virtual environment. While there are some things about teaching that remain the same regardless of the mode of instruction, virtual learning does require some significant revisions to instructional planning and implementation that are unique. As such, ensuring that pre-service educators are provided instruction during their preparation programs on how to effectively teach in a virtual learning environment could be a valuable addition. However, we would be remiss if we did not point out that our educator preparation programs are currently being asked to make significant and consequential changes to their programs due to the requirements included in the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future. As such, any additional changes to these programs must not be undertaken without thoughtful and robust collaboration with our institutions of higher education.

We also recognize that what we understood to be “normal” for education is no longer. This extended period of virtual learning and the tumultuous times in which it has taken place require us all to re-imagine what education can and should look like in our state. The implementation of the Blueprint will provide an exceptional launch opportunity for just such an effort. The emphasis on embracing innovations in teaching and learning provide fertile ground to explore instructional models such as the flipped classroom model. This is not a new concept. A number of schools and districts across the country have used this model to varying degrees of success. Creating a pilot program to see if this model can be effective in Maryland’s schools is a fantastic means by which to explore this model for ourselves. However, we believe that a pilot program must be designed meticulously with research best practices in mind. It must include a clear process for participation and implementation as well as a data collection and analysis process. This would allow a true, unbiased means by which to determine if such a program is something in which our state should consider investing our time and treasure in the future. House Bill

1376 does not establish any of these needed guardrails as it relates to the size, scope, and metrics of such a program.

Finally, we must be unequivocally clear. MSEA opposes any effort to create permanent virtual schools. We adamantly believe that they do not best serve our students' learning needs nor our state's goal to provide a world-class education to all Maryland students. Proponents of virtual learning programs contend that this option provides students with expanded learning opportunities and that online schools are capable of tailoring their instruction to the individual learning styles and needs of their students. They also argue that states that provide online learning options benefit from the cost savings gained by not having to spend taxpayer dollars on the resources associated with traditional brick-and-mortar schools, such as personnel, transportation, and facilities. However, research has shown that virtual schools—including virtual charter schools—do exact costs, and these costs are paid by students by way of poor academic outcomes. Given our state and our country's current experience with nearly a year of virtual learning under the emergency precautions necessitated by the pandemic, there can be no further doubt that virtual learning, by and large, has been an abysmal failure for the vast majority of our students, particularly those who are the most vulnerable or who are the most in need of academic and non-academic supports. Based on the outcry of parents throughout our state and across the nation, it appears as though we are not alone in our serious concerns about the normalizing and institutionalizing of virtual learning for our students.