

BILL: House Bill 665
TITLE: Education - Public Charter Schools - Virtual Learning Programs
DATE: February 10, 2021
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the state's local boards of education, opposes House Bill 665 because it would expand the definition of public charter school to include virtual learning programs.

MABE appreciates the bill's intent to expand virtual learning opportunities for Maryland students. However, MABE opposes expanding the definition of a public charter school to include applications to create virtual, or cyber, charter schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in statewide school facility closures and necessitated the immediate transition to distance learning through access to online platforms and other instructional materials from mid-March through the end of the school year. The demands on local school systems to provide almost exclusively online instruction to Maryland's nearly 1 million students, including the provision of tens of thousands of digital devices, has highlighted the significant and inequitable gaps in student, family, and community access to the broadband services needed to access online instruction.

Long before the pandemic, MABE advocated for funding and policies at the State and federal levels to enhance the ability of local school systems to utilize and make available educational technology that is essential to our students' college and career readiness and success. Again, before school closures mandated the shift to digital and distance learning, local boards recognized that virtual and distance learning programs and strategies are effective adjuncts to traditional classroom instruction.

MABE does not endorse the proposal to significantly amend the Charter School Act because local boards of education strongly believe that the law continues to provide a sound framework for the authorization and operation of high quality public charter schools in Maryland. Today, more than 15,000 students attend approximately 50 public charter schools; schools which are operating successfully within the framework established by the Public Charter School Act. MABE firmly believes that it is no accident that our charter schools have not experienced the failures of accountability and performance in the areas of student achievement or financial management all too common in charter schools in other states. In 2019 and 2020 scandals involving virtual charter schools emerged in California, Oklahoma, Michigan, and Indiana.

MABE supports state and local efforts to pursue the effective use of virtual learning initiatives and will continue to support programs to optimize the use of technology in improving student instruction. MABE recognizes the value and need to continuously improve student access to high quality virtual learning programs, but opposes amending the charter school law to authorize virtual, cyber charter schools. This legislation is not a necessary or appropriate means to advance virtual learning in Maryland's public schools.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 665.