



SB362 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION - VIRTUAL SCHOOLS – REVISIONS

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EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

LETTER OF INFORMATION

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Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) is submitting a letter of information on **SB362 Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Schools - Revisions**. This bill changes the requirements for a local board of education or the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to establish a virtual school and sets requirements for students, teachers, and services at a virtual school. A local school system is limited to establishing one virtual school; however, MSDE may authorize a local school system to establish a second virtual school on a showing of just cause. A virtual school may not include classes for prekindergarten or kindergarten students. MSDE or a local board of education may contract only with a nonprofit organization to provide services for a virtual school. A teacher preparation program must include instruction on training in the skills and techniques for teaching effectively in a virtual learning environment. By December 31, 2022, the State Superintendent of Schools must report the appropriate balance of synchronous and asynchronous learning.

AACPS appreciates the bill's intent to expand virtual learning opportunities for Maryland students. It is, however, important to note that local school systems are already fully authorized to provide appropriate virtual learning opportunities under existing law. AACPS initiated the Virtual Academy, the only virtual school in the State this school year. Our Virtual Academy has been showcased by MSDE due to its rigorous and purposeful structures, schedules, and organization. MSDE has also highlighted our hiring practices and professional learning.

AACPS remains committed to elevating all students and eliminating all gaps. We recognize the educational benefits of a diverse workforce that enriches the education experience of all AACPS students. We can accomplish this by investing in the development of highly effective teachers and leaders that reflect our diversity and commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and a high-quality education for all AACPS students. We recognize individuals who use student data, reflect on their practice, and engage in professional learning as highly effective educators. Such educators enhance their knowledge and skills to increase student learning in their classrooms, at their schools, and in our school district. AACPS believes that the quality of education is directly dependent on the quality of the teacher workforce, which is directly impacted by the school system's ability to recruit and retain high-quality educators. We currently do this without legislation, and as such, have concerns about some of the prescriptive language as we believe school districts should retain flexibility to best align with strategic initiatives for their programs.

AACPS requests additional clarity regarding the definition of "virtual school" and recommend that there also be clarity on the definitions of "Blended Virtual Learning," and "virtual programs" as the bill's provisions regarding a school as one where the "majority" of teaching is online, and later referenced as 60% online teaching, create confusion as to the bill's intentions.

AACPS has concerns with several other provisions in the legislation. For example, Section 7-1402(d) requires county boards of education to only contract with a nonprofit to provide services for a virtual school. AACPS seeks clarification on the intent of this language. Presumably, the intent is not to replace teachers for the delivery of education. What specially is intended by the term "services" – does this refer to the virtual platform, development of materials, or other similar deliverables? AACPS recommends that this language be removed altogether to allow districts flexibility on how to provide services to students enrolled in a virtual school.

Additionally, Section 7-1404(a) of the legislation requires a virtual school to offer enrolled students access to extracurricular activities, wrap-around services, food and nutrition services, and health care services equivalent to those services provided to who receive in-person instruction in the school system. AACPS seeks an amendment clarifying that such services would be provided by the local school system, to the extent practicable, in accordance with school system policies and procedures. It is important to note that, in accordance with COMAR and MPSSAA, a student may only represent the school in which the student is registered.

Section 7-1404(b) of the bill mandates that curriculum must be at least 60% online and include a social-emotional component specific to virtual students. MSDE is also required to must submit a report on the appropriate balance of synchronous vs. asynchronous learning by December 31, 2022. AACPS seeks an amendment requiring MSDE to collaborate without local education agencies to determine the appropriate balance of synchronous vs. asynchronous learning.

AACPS is also seeking an amendment to Section 7-1404(d) to remove the language concerning the parameters around which students would return to in-person learning. AACPS recognizes that students may be moved to in-person learning for a variety of reasons and not solely as a result of failing grades. Accordingly, this determination should remain with the local school district in accordance with school system policies and procedures.

Finally, AACPS seeks an amendment to Section 7-1406(d) of the bill, which prohibits a virtual school class from exceeding the statewide or countywide average for in-person classes. Specifically, AACPS requests an amendment to provide flexibility regarding class size to meet local personnel and budgetary needs that account for fluctuations in class size averages which is similar to our current practice of class size target ratios.

Thank you for consideration of this information regarding SB362.