

**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 362
Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Schools - Revisions**

**Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Wednesday, 2/16/2022**

**Lauren Lamb
Government Relations**

The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 362, which would alter the requirements for virtual schools by establishing teacher preparedness standards, procedures for the enrollment of students, requirements to ensure equitable access to extracurriculars and other school-based supports, comparably rigorous curriculum, and other guidelines for the operation of virtual schools.

MSEA represents 76,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students for the 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).

The use of virtual learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the relevance of teaching and learning online. As our members can attest, this approach comes with unique challenges. Virtual teaching can make it more difficult to connect with students and their families, and counties are not always equipped to support staff and students in a virtual setting.

Understandably, many educators have reservations about the merits of virtual schooling, as in-person learning has considerable benefits for students' academic and social development. However, we acknowledge that virtual schools are here to stay, and for those who need a full-time virtual setting, creating guardrails that protect students' right to a free and appropriate public education is essential.



This legislation would authorize each county to establish one virtual school serving Grades 1-12, which must deliver 60% or more of its instruction online. It includes enrollment caps and outreach to families, which can help to ensure that virtual schools reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of each county. By clearly defining virtual schools and requiring that they only work with nonprofit contractors, this legislation will discourage the proliferation of profit-driven virtual programs in Maryland.

Crucially, this bill establishes a county's virtual school should be open and accessible to all students, and that they should have access to adequate technology and full support services, including nutritional services, school counselors, and extracurricular activities. It guarantees that they can learn from the same rigorous College and Career Readiness standards applied to in-person schools.

It also ensures that the educators in virtual schools will be fully certified Maryland teachers, trained in virtual teaching strategies. This bill rightly designates that educators in virtual schools should be employees of the district where their students live, not contractors, and that they can focus on their virtual students rather than splitting their attention between online and in-person classrooms.

We also hope to work with the committee to ensure that education support professionals, such as reading and math aides or others tasked with direct instruction of students, are employees of the school district. This bill effectively clarifies that for certificated teachers, but it may need clearer guardrails to prevent irresponsible outsourcing of school staff positions. The bill specifies that certified teachers should be full employees of the county with access to professional development, and education support professionals deserve the same opportunity.

Those teaching and learning in virtual schools deserve the full scope of resources that public schools can offer. To be successful, virtual schools must have standards and systems comparable to traditional in-person schools, and this bill takes meaningful steps toward that end. We thank the sponsor and the interim workgroup for identifying these issues and crafting this proposal. **We urge the committee to issue a Favorable Report on Senate Bill 362.**