

Testimony in Support with Amendments to House Bill 1163 Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Education - Requirements

**Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
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The Maryland State Education Association supports, with amendments, House Bill 1163, which would, in part, require the State Department of Education to provide local school systems with guidance related to the periodic professional development and support for teachers to achieve virtual education best practice principles, require the Department to establish a statewide universal learning management system for public schools, and otherwise establish guidelines for virtual learning.

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 has brought 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. 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, in part, establishes processes and requirements for the State

Department to study and oversee the accessible and effective implementation of virtual education, for county boards to apply to create virtual schools, and for the equitable treatment and resource allocation for staff and students in virtual schools compared to their in-person counterparts. It also establishes a process for the creation of temporary virtual education plans to be utilized in the event of future emergency situations requiring remote learning.

While we can appreciate the benefits of creating virtual education plans, our highest priority right now is to ensure that any virtual schools created or already in operation are equitable and effective for students and staff. Thus, we believe it is important that this legislation address several other areas of concern, including but not limited to:

- Procedures regarding student enrollment in a virtual school, including requirements and enrollment caps
- A limit of one virtual school per grade band per county
- A provision that the State Department may revoke approval of a virtual school that performs in the bottom 10% of schools in the year prior, or otherwise does not meet established requirements
- Technology requirements that maintain the prohibition on contracting with for-profit entities but allow for more local control regarding instructional tools
- Further detail or clarification regarding class size in a virtual setting, teacher preparation requirements, and distinctions between virtual schools and other virtual learning opportunities

This bill already includes several strong provisions that would maintain collective bargaining rights, affirm that educators must be employees of the county board, ensure appropriate technology and services for students and staff, and establish common-sense guardrails on what may be required of staff working in virtual settings. Adding to the above-referenced areas would further clarify and strengthen this legislation.

Those teaching and learning in virtual schools deserve the full scope of resources that public schools can offer. With amendments, this bill can establish appropriate guardrails that protect and support students and staff. **We urge the committee to issue a Favorable Report, with amendments, on House Bill 1163.**