

Senate Bill 362 – SB 362

Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – **OPPOSE**

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The Blended Virtual Program (BVP) has been a lifesaving (both mentally and wellness) experience for my son, Thomas Barksdale. Thomas attended the BVP Pilot Program 2021 - 2022. Thomas was able to continue to succeed in his academics as an honor roll student because of the Blended Virtual Program. Thomas was and still is uncomfortable and scared about returning to in-person schooling due to the coronavirus. This program has allowed Thomas to feel safe and secure while still having an interactive schooling relationship with teachers, counselors, and students. This virtual program is a perfect combination for students like Thomas and gives them an alternative to excel and build confidence in their academic studies and life. There should be educational representation for all students.

The virtual program is an excellent foundation in giving Thomas the essentials in learning and preparing him for his college-level academics journey through the program's independence studies, time management for assignments, professor-level interaction with teachers and counselors, and confidence-building activities and reinforcement support from the staff members. Thomas was a good student anyway, but this program has taken him to the next level by preparing him for college and all of the expectations of the college status. We are both extremely pleased with the results of this program and look forward to participating in next year's virtual program.

We have to remember that the BVP is a pilot program, so some bumps in the road are expected and serve as a conveyance for improving the program. Overall, the first year was very successful and will be the baseline for the following years to come. As a parent, I was especially pleased with the teachers and counselor's supportive efforts and consistent feedback regarding Thomas's progress in the program and his grades. It was admirable having Thomas interact with teachers from all parts of the United States and hearing their stories and experiences. I believe this helps the students think about exploring outside of their regional areas, and one may set their sights on adventuring to other States and countries due to hearing such experiences. A teacher's locality should not determine if they can teach a student in a different location; however, one's certification merit, positive experiences, and how well they can train and develop a student should be determining factors. Not to mention allowing the virtual program the flexibility to expand in the future and address any forthcoming pandemics and/or devastating worldly events. This virtual program should serve as backup for the State of Maryland for any future unforeseen incidents and provide the resources to accommodate additional teachers and students at a moment's notice.

I would propose keeping the existing Virtual Program in place and increasing the threshold for allowing additional students to participate in the program. The State of Maryland should also incorporate a backup plan to enable the Virtual Program Coordinators to work with the Eastern Shore local schools to integrate all students for future lockdowns. This effort would add structure, consistency, accountability, transparency, and preparedness for a standardized State of Maryland virtual education system.....which is on the horizon.

Ursula Owens
Very Respectively,
Ursula Owens-Barksdale