

BILL: House Bill 1163
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Education - Requirements
DATE: March 9, 2022
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports the intent of House Bill 1163 to build a framework for a robust statewide approach to ensuring access for all students to high quality virtual learning. However, given the breadth and scope of the many complex provisions of this legislation, and the stakeholder input being provided on closely related Senate legislation, MABE requests amendments aligned with the concerns raised last session and to reflect the need for alignment with the currently pending Senate Bill 362.

Specifically, MABE has identified the following issues of concern with House Bill 1163, including: the intent of the “flip the classroom” asynchronous learning system pilot, the role of the statewide universal learning management system, the distinctions between permanent and temporary virtual schools, and the need for a separate temporary virtual school administrative office and other mandated staffing provisions. Clearly, this is a comprehensive and therefore complex piece of legislation; a bill proposing major modifications to the existing law which local boards believe provides significant authority and flexibility for local school systems to establish virtual schools.

MABE participated in extensive discussions and deliberations on amendments to this legislation in the 2021 legislative session. In this context, MABE looks forward to engaging constructively in the dialogue on legislation in the 2022 session to make reasonable improvements and clarifications to the processes for state review and approval and local operation of virtual schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated widespread home-based virtual learning and has highlighted a long-documented and persistent inequity of students that lack adequate broadband access. This digital divide, commonly known as the homework gap, impacts millions of students across the nation, and families and students in each of Maryland’s 24 local jurisdictions and school systems. The equity issues arising from virtual learning must continue to be of the highest priority in crafting a new statewide approach to virtual learning.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on House Bill 1163 in the context of aligning it with Senate Bill 362 and the type of amendments described above.