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RE: Senate Bill 362 – Primary and Secondary Virtual Schools – Oppose

Dear Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future was passed last year with a commitment to "enrich student experiences, accelerate student outcomes, and improve the overall quality of education in Maryland." As the Coordinator for the ESMEC BVP, our team worked very closely with MSDE over the spring of 2021 to develop and implement an innovative, high quality virtual learning program accessible to all students in grades 6 through 12 on Maryland's Eastern Shore that would align closely with the goals of the Blueprint.

Dr. Jon Andes, Executive Director of ESMEC, submitted written testimony which explains the ESMEC BVP in more detail. The purpose for my testimony today is to share the impact that I have seen this program have on the students and families in our region. The ESMEC BVP is structured to be an **alternative pathway to graduation**, not just a COVID relief plan. The reasons for participating in our program go far beyond the COVID pandemic.

- "My child has a chronic illness and misses a lot of time when doing in-person classes."
- "My child can focus on academics and not worry about her social anxiety."
- "My child often travels out of state to train for hockey during part of the year."
- "This keeps [my child] out of trouble so he can focus on what he needs to do in school."
- "My child likes working at his own pace and his grades reflect that he is more relaxed and focused."
- "My daughter is thriving with this program! She always said she felt dumb doing her own homeschool program without teachers and instruction. Now she is ahead and has great grades!"

By **operating as a program** and not an individual school, students maintain a close connection with the local school staff and students and are eligible to participate in clubs, athletics, honor societies, and other school-based events, including prom and graduation. Local schools are also accountable for the success of each student, as the BVP students are required to take all state tests at their local school and student attendance data and test scores are reported by the school.

Our partnership with a for-profit organization allows us to offer 65 courses which are all taught by **Maryland-certified educators**. This means we are not taking away teachers from our in-person programs, which are already suffering from teacher shortages and increasing class sizes. Yes, the ESMEC BVP has experienced some growing pains over the first seven months of operation. However, our feedback from parents and students has been overwhelmingly positive with 77% of families wanting their child to continue in the program next school year.

With many of the changes required by SB 362, the ESMEC BVP will not be able to continue to meet the virtual learning needs of our students. By ending the ESMEC BVP, you are leaving the door open for many students and families to leave public education as they search for a private school or homeschool program that will meet their child's needs. **Please give our innovative program the chance to improve and grow so we can continue to provide virtual learning opportunities to the Eastern Shore's current and future students.**

Sincerely,



Erin Crissman