



**Dr. Michael J. Martirano**  
**Superintendent, Howard County Public School System**

**Testimony Submitted to the Maryland Senate,  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
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**SB0321: SUPPORT**

**Public Schools - Length of School Year and Innovative School Scheduling Models – Revisions**

As the Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System, each and every decision I make centers on the educational well-being of over 57,000 students attending our schools. Each year as we put together the puzzle of setting out the school system calendar, the over-arching factor in decision making must always be our responsibility as teachers and administrators to deliver sustained, quality education that delivers an educational experience that results in every student achieving. Equitable opportunity for academic growth over the course of a year in each grade level needs to take priority over counting days in seats.

In the not so distant past, mandated book-ends on our calendar between Labor Day and June 15<sup>th</sup> caused consternation and frustration from local boards of education all the way down to administrators and teachers. It took away from our ability to build in ample time during the school year for professional development to strengthen instructional skills and collaborate with coworkers on student and school-wide goals. Professional days scheduled prior to students returning to school do not allow staff to meet the evolving instructional needs of students as the year progresses, nor do the traditionally used half days always allow for desired productivity. The limited timeframe also created a longer summer break, adding to the time needed to reacclimatize students to the classroom and refresh what they learned from the previous year.

This legislative body, however, took action to remove the restraints of the then Governor’s executive order and allow school systems to meet the statutorily defined 180 days of instruction within a 10-month period of their choosing. SB0321 is before you today to continue to move the needle forward in giving school systems the flexibility to truly maximize instructional time by meeting the bill’s stated intent to “explore the use of innovative school scheduling models, including extended year, year-round schooling, 4-day school week, or other school scheduling models that do not allow for prolonged lapses in instruction time in public schools.”

Our school system calendar is developed collaboratively with the input of educators, parents, and other school system stakeholders through public participation on a calendar committee and Board of Education of Howard County hearings. That would continue to be the case should SB0321 pass, and any new models are considered.

In a county where poverty levels have nearly doubled over the last 10 years, required special education services continue to rise, and overcoming the learning loss and mental health challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic remains a priority, the Howard County Public School System has made a concerted effort to ensure schools are a hub for the resources needed to remove barriers to student success. This includes expanded meal programs and a model bringing mental health care providers into schools where our most vulnerable families can easily access them during their daily routines. As this role beyond the direct educational scope continues to expand for all local school systems, greater flexibility to consider student access to these and many other essential services would be a benefit.

In my more than 35 years of professional K-12 education experience, I have dealt with the issue of the school calendar at all levels, including at the state level as the West Virginia State Superintendent of Schools. There, we saw the need to look outside the box to find innovative approaches to the school calendar, ultimately gaining legislative reform to reimagine instructional time with the intent of maximizing academic learning. As educators, the local school system has the keenest insight into how and when to effectively deliver educational content.

Maryland is ripe for an overhaul of educational statute and state-wide policy related to the local school calendar. Current limitations caused by the restrictive requirements of the 180-day academic calendar are not only causing great dismay among educators, but holding our state back from being innovative and forward-thinking when it comes to maximizing instructional time to meet student needs. For these reasons, I request a favorable report of SB0321 from this Committee in order to afford local school systems the opportunity to address this issue directly with the citizens and students we serve.