



**MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE**

February 22, 2023

HB 737

**Alternative Education Options - Right to Learn and Broadening Options and
Opportunities for Students Today Programs (Right to Learn Act of 2023)**

House Ways & Means Committee

Position: FAVORABLE

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 737. This bill would empower students in failing schools with additional options and also codify state scholarships, providing continuity for future generations of low-income children through the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Scholarship Program. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

We offer this testimony on behalf of the large number of low-income families attending Catholic schools statewide who receive BOOST scholarship assistance and the thousands more who would seek that assistance in the future. The BOOST Scholarship Program has provided expanded educational options for low-income Maryland K-12 students through the provision of scholarship assistance in the Maryland budget since 2016. One hundred percent of scholarship recipients are eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Meal Program (FARMs). Scholarship recipients are certified as eligible through the State Department of Education (MSDE). This bill would continue to provide scholarship assistance to 100% low-income FARMs-eligible students.

To date, BOOST has provided approximately 20,000 scholarships, the majority of which have been awarded to minority recipients. BOOST is helping to break the cycle of poverty for minority students whose parents choose a Catholic school using a BOOST Scholarship, as an average of 98% of students who graduate at a Maryland Catholic school go on to graduate and attend college. BOOST is also enhancing the education of students with disabilities, with double scholarship awards going to students with special needs.

Noteworthy highlights regarding scholarships awarded for last school year are as follows:

- The majority of student-recipients were minorities (55.5%), including 32% Black and 15% Latino.

- BOOST scholarship-recipient families collectively had an average income of just over \$36,000 for their entire *household*.
- 1,030 student-recipients were English Language Learners (ELLs).
- The majority of program dollars go toward students who used BOOST to transfer from public school, with a marked increase in that group for this year. \$5.36 million in scholarships were awarded to students who used BOOST to transfer from a public school.

** NOTE: Public school students are given significantly higher scholarship amounts. In fact, the scholarship award ratio is approximately 3:1, being three scholarship dollars given to assist public school student transfers for every one dollar assisting low-income students already attending a nonpublic school.*

- BOOST scholarship recipients live in 21 of the 24 Maryland counties and Baltimore City, but the vast majority are low-income students from Maryland's four largest jurisdictions.

In all, the BOOST Scholarship Program has helped to make Catholic schools an option for so many families. The majority of BOOST scholarships and scholarship dollars are awarded to students whose parents chose a Catholic school this year, many having transferred from a public school. The scholarship recipient demographic data cited above mirrors that of our school families in many Catholic schools, which welcome large numbers of low-income, immigrant and first-generation, minority, and non-Catholic students.

The BOOST Scholarship Program has acted as an integral supplemental source of assistance to low-income families, fostering a partnership between Catholic schools and the State of Maryland to fight the cycle of poverty. Our Catholic schools remain committed to working alongside the State of Maryland in providing options for low-income students. It is for these reasons, on behalf of the families empowered by BOOST scholarships to choose Catholic schools, that we urge the Maryland General Assembly to secure BOOST funding well into the future through House Bill 737.