TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HB1267 Promise Schools – Establishment

POSITION: Oppose

BY: Nancy Soreng – President

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The League of Women Voters of Maryland (LWVMD) is a nonpartisan organization that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy. LWVMD supports programs and reforms that promote equal access to quality education and is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion in principle and in practice.

This bill, HB1267 *Promise Schools - Establishment*, would designate a certain number of Community Schools that have been identified as low-performing or in need of improvement as promise schools. The bill specifies that the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) must identify at least 10 eligible schools as promise schools, which would then be required to meet certain requirements. It mandates an annual appropriation of $2,000,000 to support County boards with technical assistance.

LWVMD opposes HB1267. It's not clear whether this bill reinforces or competes with the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, which is designed as a comprehensive approach to school improvement and is in the early stages of implementation. HB1267 competes by allocating funding to a new program rather than allocate additional resources to fully fund the Blueprint. It's also unclear how it will impact the Community Schools model more broadly, which offers an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement. Community Schools is an evidence-based strategy that is appropriate for students of all backgrounds and has a positive impact on educational outcomes. There is no comparable research on the efficacy of promise schools.

Limiting the number of promise schools to 10 runs the risk of introducing subjective criteria into the selection of "low performing" schools since it relies on the judgment of MSDE officials to designate 10 schools as promise schools. The current five star rating system used to identify low performing schools is highly flawed, as it over identifies high poverty schools as low-performing. An analysis of the Maryland five-star rating system from the Baltimore Education Research Consortium documented the relationship between report card rating and the percentage of a school's economically disadvantaged students. No high-poverty school earned a five-star rating under the Maryland system thus reinforcing the influence of poverty rather than capturing the value added by educators. In contrast to promise schools, Community Schools are an option for all schools.

The bill does reinforce the Blueprint's focus on improving low-performing, high poverty schools, but because the number of potential promise schools is small, it's unclear whether its impact will be significant.

The League of Women Voters of Maryland urges the committee to give an unfavorable report to HB1267.