



SB610 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION – VIRTUAL EDUCATION

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WAYS AND MEANS

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

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Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) supports with amendments **SB610 Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Education**. This bill establishes requirements related to virtual education for public schools, including requirements for: (1) virtual schools; (2) teacher preparation programs; and (3) expanding computer and Internet security infrastructure for virtual education. Specifically, the bill: (1) authorizes virtual education days for severe weather conditions; (2) permits the establishment of a virtual school by county boards; and (3) allows for the operation of public schools virtually during a prolonged state of emergency. If a virtual education day is used because severe weather prevents the operation of schools normally, the school system must have used all days allocated for closure due to inclement weather and virtual education day must consist of at least four synchronous learning hours. Regarding the establishment of virtual schools, the bill prevents virtual schools for the elementary band from being approved for operation before December 1, 2024; permits county boards to establish one additional virtual school upon a showing of just cause; and prohibits a for-profit entity from operating or administering a virtual school. A virtual school may not include classes for prekindergarten or kindergarten students. Finally, the bill included various reporting requirements for MSDE.

AACPS appreciates the bill's intent to expand virtual learning opportunities for Maryland students and to build a framework for a robust statewide approach to ensure access for students to virtual learning. However, it is important to note that local school systems are already fully authorized to provide appropriate virtual learning opportunities under existing State law. In fact, AACPS is currently operating the only stand-alone virtual school in the State, the AACPS Virtual Academy. The Virtual Academy services students who due to personal medical conditions, the medical conditions of a member of the household, or social emotional barriers are prevented from attending brick-and-mortar schools. Students in the Virtual Academy receive real-time, synchronous instruction four and a half to six hours per day from certified AACPS instructors and participate in AACPS curriculum and assessments as well as all in-person mandatory Maryland State assessments. The AACPS Virtual Academy served over 500 students during the 2021-2022 school year.

While AACPS is supportive of efforts to expand virtual learning, we are concerned regarding the specific limitations imposed by the bill on the use of virtual education during inclement weather days and virtual schools and programs. With regard to the use of virtual education during inclement weather days, AACPS requests that the prescriptive notifications requirements of this bill regarding use of virtual education during severe weather be removed as it does not align with the way AACPS notifies staff, students, and families of school closure or the use of virtual education. Rather, AACPS requests that school systems be permitted to notify their staff, students, and families of the transition to a virtual education day in case of severe weather in a way they deem best.

Additionally, AACPS believes the requirement that school systems use all days allocated for closure for inclement weather before using a virtual education day in the case of inclement weather is contrary to the intent of this bill. The purpose of virtual education is to continue with teaching and learning instead of closing schools and thereby forfeiting a school day due to inclement weather. AACPS believes that this requirement should be removed from SB610 in order to preserve flexibility at the local level on this matter and allow for continued teaching and learning in cases of

inclement weather. Similarly, AACPS respectfully requests that asynchronous learning days be permitted to continue the learning experience for students in the case of inclement weather.

AACPS also requests amendments to the portions of this bill addressing the establishment of virtual schools and programs. AACPS is concerned regarding the requirement of this bill to provide students enrolled in a virtual school or program with access to athletic opportunities and, to the extent practicable, extracurricular activities at the school the student would otherwise attend. AACPS believes that local flexibility should be preserved in this instance as it may not always be appropriate to provide students in virtual schools with access to extracurricular activities in person. For example, in-person curriculars are currently not available to AACPS Virtual Academy students. Before students and families are permitted to enroll in the Virtual Academy, AACPS sets the expectation that students will not participate in any in-person activities, with the exception of mandatory in-person State testing. However, this does not mean that Virtual Academy students do not have access to those services available to their peers attending brick-and-mortar schools. Virtual Academy students have access to essential services, such as the ability to purchase meals, including free and reduced price meals, as well as extracurricular activities. Students attending the Virtual Academy have access to virtual co-curricular experiences and clubs with no in-person gatherings, and students who are interested in in-person athletic programs are encouraged to seek opportunities through community organizations. AACPS students who attend the Virtual Academy enroll in this unique program because it best meets their educational needs. These students are unable to participate in in-person learning, it is not appropriate to make in-person extracurricular and athletic opportunities available to them. AACPS would respectfully request that this requirement be removed from the bill.

Finally, AACPS is concerned regarding the requirement of this bill to provide social and emotional wellness components to students in virtual schools. The same is not currently required for comprehensive schools. AACPS requests this language be struck from the bill so that virtual schools and programs are not subject to additional standards that comprehensive schools are not.

Accordingly, AACPS respectfully requests a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** committee report on SB610.