

**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 610
Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Education**

**House Ways and Means Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 610, which would require a teacher preparation program to include certain training related to teaching in a virtual learning environment as a component of instruction, provide that a county board of education may authorize a county superintendent of schools to provide virtual education days to students instead of closing the public schools in the county because of severe weather conditions, and alter the requirements for virtual schools operated by county boards of education.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students so they can pursue their dreams. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

The use of virtual learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the relevance of teaching and learning online. As our members can attest, this approach comes with unique challenges. Virtual teaching can make it more difficult to connect with students and their families, and counties are not always equipped to support staff and students in a virtual setting. This legislation takes steps to ensure that in the event of another public health emergency or even an inclement weather day, local school systems will be better prepared to temporarily shift to virtual learning.



Many educators have reservations about the merits of permanent virtual schools, as in-person learning has considerable benefits for students' academic and social development. However, we acknowledge that virtual schools are here to stay, and for those who need or prefer a full-time virtual setting, creating guardrails that protect students' right to a free and appropriate public education is essential.

This legislation would authorize – though not require – each county to establish one virtual school for the elementary, middle, and high school grade bands. It includes enrollment caps and outreach to families, which can help to ensure that virtual schools reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of each county. By clearly defining virtual schools and requiring that they only work with nonprofit contractors, this legislation will discourage the proliferation of profit-driven virtual programs in Maryland.

Crucially, this bill establishes a county's virtual school should be open to all students, and that they should have access to adequate technology and full support services, including nutritional services, social-emotional wellness programming, and extracurricular activities. It ensures that they can learn using the same rigorous standards applied to in-person schools.

It also guarantees that the educators in virtual schools will be fully certificated Maryland teachers, trained in virtual teaching strategies. This bill rightly designates that educators in virtual schools should be employees of the county or collaborating county where the school is based, not contractors, and that they should be able to focus on their virtual students rather than splitting their attention between online and in-person classrooms simultaneously.

Those teaching and learning in virtual schools deserve the full scope of resources that public schools can offer. To be successful, virtual schools must have quality standards and systems comparable to those at traditional in-person schools, and this bill takes meaningful steps toward that end.

We urge the committee to issue a Favorable Report on Senate Bill 610.