

**Testimony in OPPOSITION to House Bill 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
February 22, 2023**

**Samantha Zwerling
Government Relations**

The Maryland State Education Association stands in strong opposition to House Bill 737, which codifies Maryland's school voucher program, Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST), with a mandated appropriation and creates a new voucher program, the Right to Learn Program. MSEA continues our request for the complete elimination of the BOOST program.

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).

Public dollars should fund public schools. The BOOST private school voucher program has been highly controversial since its inception and diverts attention and resources from the real needs of our students and public school communities.

To better serve struggling students and students from low wealth communities, funds should be used to implement the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and serve the newly identified 110,000 students statewide eligible for free and reduced priced meals. There are a myriad of things our schools, students, and communities need right now to help us recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Every school system across the state is facing staggering staffing shortages. The \$10 million annually diverted to private schools through the use of vouchers in the BOOST program under this bill could go a long way in hiring the desperately needed substitute teachers across the state. Those dollars could help hire more bus drivers, to help ensure that students get to school safely, and parents and guardians are able to consistently make it to work on time. Those funds could be used to ensure there is a school nurse and a mental health provider in every building. That funding could go directly towards the many community schools we are working to stand-up across the state, with a proven record in helping to provide wrap-around services and family support to students living in concentrated poverty.



The State and education stakeholders (parents, students, educators) spent five years working to determine how we can increase standards for our students and educators in public schools through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. Schools that participate in the BOOST voucher program do not have the same rigorous standards or accountability to legislators or taxpayers. They are not required to administer the same standards-based assessments, the certification requirements for their teachers are not comparable, and educators are not evaluated similarly, yet these schools are given public tax dollars. Public funding should go to public schools with high standards to serve ALL Maryland students.

The legislature should focus on the implementation of the Blueprint and responding to the urgent needs of our public schools. Students and families are counting on us to get this right, and to help them recover from the pandemic. Our kids can't wait.

MSEA strongly urges an Unfavorable Report on House Bill 737.