



**Board of Education of Howard County
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland House of Delegates,
Ways and Means Committee
March 1, 2023**

**Board of Education
of Howard County**

**HB1054: FAVORABLE W/AMENDMENTS
School Health and Vision Services - Screenings and Eye Examinations**

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The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) supports **HB1054 School Health and Vision Services - Screenings and Eye Examinations** with amendments to address required forms as well as availability of funding to make the changes envisioned by the bill related to providing vision screenings, exams, and glasses that would be the responsibility of the school system or local health department.

Initially, HB1054 requires a county board that has a student health form to be completed by a provider, to ask for identified health issues that may interfere with the student's academic performance and a plan to address the health issue. The Howard County Public School System's (HCPSS) Health Services staff notes while physicians will most likely report generalities that could be available for appropriate staff, academic learning plans would be a decision by the school team.

Expanding existing requirements for vision screenings at regular intervals, HB1054 also requires a student who enters the third or fourth grade to receive a screening for vision difficulties. Differing from previous versions of the bill, however, the language no longer includes requirements for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Behavioral Plan, that exhibits problem behavior, has a change in medical history, or has a decline in academic performance. A public school would be required to refer a student who is known to have been diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental delay for an eye exam. If a student fails a vision screening, or shows signs and symptoms during the screening that justify an eye examination, the school system must ensure the student gets an exam and glasses if needed.

Under current law HCPSS partners with the Howard County Health Department (HCHD) to provide vision screenings for all students at entry into the school system, as well as in 1st and 8th grades. Results of these screenings are provided to parents/guardians, along with educational materials that overview potential visual impairments and an explanation of the educational impact of untreated visual impairments. Students who fail these screenings are also provided additional materials and a recommendation for parents/guardians to follow-up with a comprehensive eye exam. It is likely HCHD will need additional resources to provide screening for the added grade band, or the costs will fall to the school system. Staff is currently able to refer a student at any age for a screening when concerns with vision arise. The additional language for staff to determine if a student is showing signs and symptoms that justify an eye examination during a screening would fall to HCHD staff conducting the screening as opposed to the county board called for in the bill, but it is unclear what expertise would be needed to identify signs and symptoms and may require additional time to complete screenings. This same new section of the bill requires the county board to "determine whether the student subsequent to the screening should receive an eye

examination,” which is unclear as to what determination is being made beyond the outcome of a screening.

Two reporting requirements within the bill are troubling to HCPSS Health Services staff. The first is a requirement that if a student does not return an eye examination form within 30 days of receipt the school must notify the student support team. While HCPSS Health Services staff currently follows up on these forms and works with pupil personnel workers in encouraging families to seek exams and return paperwork, 30 days is too short of a turn-around. Most appointment lead times are longer than this, and thus the bill sets an unrealistic timeframe. More troubling, however, is the requirement for eye examination forms to be returned to the system before a student may be enrolled in school. Currently, the only health information required for enrollment is immunization verification for public health related concerns impacting the entire student population.

School systems can partner with the newly established Vision for Maryland Program or other nonprofits to fund required screenings and eye exams. HB1054 requires the Governor to include at least \$2.5 million annually for the Vision for Maryland Program, however this section of the bill does not become effective until 2025. The Program must enable Vision to Learn (VTL) - a nonprofit organization that provides vision screenings, eye examinations, and glasses, free of charge, to children in low-income communities and currently works with Baltimore City Schools - to expand its services to five counties in the state each fiscal year until VTL services are available in every county. Staff supports this initial appropriation that could help incrementally expand services for students. However, funding equivalent to school system needs should be fully realized before expansion of mandated screenings and exams as outlined in HB1054. The bill does include \$500,000 annually that could be distributed to county boards to cover screenings, exams, or eyeglasses required by both existing statute and this bill, but the new grade band screening alone would likely not be covered by this amount when disbursed across 24 counties.

Lastly, HB1054 convenes a workgroup with a report due by December 2024 that would include county boards of education, local health departments, the Maryland Optometric Association, the Maryland Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons, Vision for Baltimore, and any other relevant state and local agencies or organizations to conduct a needs analysis and feasibility study on vision care for children in the state. This report would be beneficial if conducted prior to the mandates imposed by the bill.

The Board acknowledges and appreciates the sponsor has worked over the years on this bill to address concerns from advocates. Anticipated additional amendments recently shared by the sponsor to address what measures would be used to determine signs and symptoms that justify an eye examination during a screening, clarify the responsibility of local school systems to connect students with resources rather than provide them, and indicate the scope of the \$500,000 available to county boards is limited to required screenings, reflects their willingness to lesson the unfunded mandate on school systems and local health departments.

With the remaining concerns addressed through amendments, we urge a FAVORABLE report of HB1054 from this Committee.