



**MARYLAND  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE**

**February 20, 2024**

**HB 791**

**Operating Budget - Funding - Scholarships for Nonpublic School Students**

**House Appropriations Committee**

**Position: FAVORABLE**

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 791. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government. Catholic schools also educate nearly 50,000 of the roughly 135,000 nonpublic school students in Maryland.

House Bill 791 would simply codify the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Scholarship Program, funded in the Maryland state budget since 2016, and thus provide scholarship continuity for future generations of low-income children.

For the current school year, simply based on the going rates (which are not full scholarships), student applications reflected \$18 million in scholarship demand for the \$9 million available for the program. Nearly 2,000 low-income students were denied scholarships due to a lack of funding. This legislation would help alleviate much of that unmet need.

We offer this testimony on behalf of the large number of low-income families attending Catholic schools statewide who receive BOOST scholarship assistance and the thousands more who would seek that assistance in the future. The BOOST Scholarship Program has provided expanded educational options for low-income Maryland K-12 students through the provision of scholarship assistance in the Maryland budget since 2016. One hundred percent of scholarship recipients are eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Meal Program (FARMs). Scholarship recipients are certified as eligible through the State Department of Education (MSDE). This bill would continue to provide scholarship assistance to 100% low-income FARMs-eligible students.

To date, BOOST has provided approximately 23,000 scholarships, the majority of which have been awarded to minority recipients. BOOST is helping to break the cycle of poverty for minority students whose parents choose a Catholic school using a BOOST Scholarship, as an average of 98% of students who graduate at a Maryland Catholic school go on to graduate and

attend college. BOOST is also enhancing the education of students with disabilities, with double scholarship awards going to students with special needs.

In all, the BOOST Scholarship Program has helped to make Catholic schools an option for so many families. The majority of BOOST scholarships and scholarship dollars over the history of the program have been awarded to students whose parents chose a Catholic school this year, many having transferred from a public school. The scholarship recipient demographic data cited above mirrors that of our school families in many Catholic schools, which welcome large numbers of low-income, immigrant and first-generation, minority, and non-Catholic students.

The BOOST Scholarship Program has acted as an integral supplemental source of assistance to low-income families, fostering a partnership between Catholic schools and the State of Maryland to fight the cycle of poverty. Our Catholic schools remain committed to working alongside the State of Maryland in providing options for low-income students. It is for these reasons, on behalf of the families empowered by BOOST scholarships to choose Catholic schools, that we urge the Maryland General Assembly to secure BOOST funding well into the future through House Bill 791.