

**February 20, 2024**

My name is Madison Marino, a visiting fellow in education policy at the Maryland Family Institute, and I am here today to ask for your favorable consideration of House Bill 791.

In the past decade, there has been a growing trend among states to embrace various forms of education choice. Last year, 2023, was named the “year of education freedom,” as we saw “the most significant expansions of parental choice in education in U.S. history.”<sup>1</sup> Currently, 31 states have education choice programs, and 65 parental choice programs exist.<sup>2</sup>

As education choice expands, rigorous scientific research shows numerous benefits. Regarding academic achievement, “Researchers have conducted 16 random assignment studies, the gold standard of empirical research...Of those 16, 10 studies found statistically significant positive effects for participating students. Just two found negative effects, unique to a heavily regulated program in Louisiana that has discouraged high-performing private schools from participating, and four found neutral effects.”<sup>3</sup> Concerning academic attainment, encompassing high school completion and college enrollment among participating students, “Researchers have conducted five random assignment studies...Three of these studies found increases in high school graduation rates and college enrollment. Two found null effects for students enrolling in school choice programs such as vouchers and tax credit scholarships.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, adopting choice yields numerous non-academic benefits. Empirical evidence indicates that school choice has had positive effects on “civic engagement<sup>5</sup> and crime reduction<sup>6</sup>, to improve student safety<sup>7</sup>, and to have positive impacts on character as seen in outcomes... such as positive effects on tolerance of others<sup>8</sup> and higher levels of voluntarism<sup>9</sup>.”<sup>10</sup>

Maryland’s only private school choice program, the Broadening Options for Students Today, provides expanded educational options for low-income Maryland K-12 students and is relatively small compared to other school choice initiatives in nearby jurisdictions. Pennsylvania’s tax-credit scholarship programs

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<sup>1</sup> “2023: The Year of Education Freedom,” The Heritage Foundation, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/BG3788.pdf> (accessed on February 16, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> “School Choice in America,” American Federation for Children, <https://www.federationforchildren.org/school-choice-in-america/> (accessed on February 15, 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Lindsey M. Burke, “The Data Prove Education Choice Is a Winner for Students and Taxpayers,” August 18, 2022, The Data Prove Education Choice Is a Winner for Students and Taxpayers | The Heritage Foundation (accessed on February 16, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick J. Wolf, Civics Exam: Schools of Choice Boost Civic Values, *EducationNext*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2007), pp. 66- 73.

<sup>6</sup> Corey DeAngelis and Patrick J. Wolf, Private School Choice and Crime: Evidence from Milwaukee, *Social Science Quarterly*, July 7, 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ssqu.12698>

<sup>7</sup> Ann Webber, Ning Rui, Roberta Garrison-Mogren, Robert B. Olsen, Babette Gutmann, and Meredith Bachman, Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied, Institute of Education Sciences, May 2019, at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594875.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> David J. Fleming, William Mitchell, and Michael McNally, Can Markets Make Citizens? School Vouchers, Political Tolerance, and Civic Engagement, *Journal of School Choice*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2014), pp. 213 – 236

<sup>9</sup> Patrick J. Wolf, Civics Exam, *EducationNext*, Vol. 7, No. 3, at <https://www.educationnext.org/civics-exam/>

<sup>10</sup> “School Choice: Expanding Educational Freedom for All,” Testimony before the Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education on April 18, 2023, [https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/4.18.23\\_school\\_choice\\_hearing\\_burke\\_testimony\\_final.pdf](https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/4.18.23_school_choice_hearing_burke_testimony_final.pdf) (accessed on February 16, 2024)

will offer approximately \$600 million<sup>11</sup> in funding next year and have more than 77,000 children<sup>12</sup> participate in the 2021-2022 school year. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship in the District of Columbia receives \$17.5 million<sup>13</sup> in annual appropriations.

Support for school choice is also at an all-time high. According to a recent poll from RealClear Opinion Research, which surveyed 1,000 registered voters, the concept of school choice enjoys overwhelming support; 71% of voters say they are supportive, and 13% are opposed.<sup>14</sup> 73% of Black and 71% of Hispanic voters also support such a policy.<sup>15</sup>

Outside of those participating in the relatively small BOOST program, parents in Maryland do not have many choices for their child's education. For them, access to quality education is conditional on their ability to purchase an expensive home or to pay twice. Maryland doesn't have interdistrict or intradistrict open enrollment policies, so students aren't able to transfer to another school within or outside of their residential school district.<sup>16</sup> Charter schools are the only publicly funded education choice option, but according to a recent CATO report, "most charter schools are in the Baltimore-Washington area, making them geographically inaccessible to many Marylanders."<sup>17</sup>

Strong parental support is evident in the demand for the BOOST program. Last year, there was extreme demand among families to participate in BOOST. The advisory board received 7,036 applications, up from 6,000 applicants the year before.<sup>18</sup> Of the 7,000 applicants, 4,741 families were deemed income-eligible for the program.<sup>19</sup> If all income-eligible applicants were awarded a scholarship, the board would have needed about \$18 million in total funding for BOOST, surpassing the \$9 million appropriated for the 2023-2024 SY program.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, because of the number of applicants, the Advisory board concluded that no new applicants could be awarded scholarships, and only those students who received scholarships last year and their siblings would be considered for awards.<sup>21</sup>

The BOOST Scholarship program has provided more than 20,000 scholarships since the program's inception, the majority of which have been awarded to minority recipients.<sup>22</sup> The program impact has also been wide-reaching: low-income students residing in 21 out of 24 counties and the city of Baltimore

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<sup>11</sup> "Hope for School Choice in Pennsylvania," WSJ, December 19, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pennsylvania-school-choice-tax-credit-scholarships-josh-shapiro-legislature-c7b6e869> (accessed on February 16, 2024)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program," Ed Choice, <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/district-of-columbia-opportunity-scholarship-program/> (accessed on February 16, 2024)

<sup>14</sup> "New Poll: School Choice Support Soars from 2020," American Federation for Children, <https://www.federationforchildren.org/new-poll-school-choice-support-soars-from-2020/> (accessed on February 16, 2024)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Maryland's BOOST Is Promising, but More Work is Needed," CATO Institute, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/marylands-boost-promising-more-work-needed#notes> (accessed on February 16, 2024)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Mikenzie Frost, "BOOST Scholarship program sees 'extreme demand'; funds uncertain for new applicants," August 21, 2023, <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/boost-scholarship-program-seesextreme-demand-funds-uncertain-for-new-applicants> (accessed on February 15, 2024)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.marylandboost.org/> (accessed on February 16, 2024)

participated in the program for the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>23</sup> The average household income of families participating in the 2023-2024 SY program was \$43,500, reflecting the program's profound assistance to those in financial need.<sup>24</sup> More than half of the students participating in the program are children of color, and nearly 1,000 students are English language learners or have special needs and have support and inclusivity through the program's offerings.<sup>25</sup>

The BOOST program effectively assists the families and students in greatest need while ensuring that families lacking financial means can still exercise parental choice. For this reason, I ask for your favorable consideration of HB 791, which would modestly expand funding for the BOOST program.

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<sup>23</sup> Fiscal 2024 Joint Chairmen's Report on the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) program, [BOOST Scholarship Program, Joint Chairman's Report January 2024 \(marylandpublicschools.org\)](https://www.marylandpublicschools.org/boost) (accessed on February 15, 2024)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.