



March 6, 2024

HB 704

Primary and Secondary Education - Education Savings Account Program – Established

House Appropriations Committee

Position: FAVORABLE

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in SUPPORT for House Bill 704. 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. We offer this testimony on behalf of the families of approximately 50,000 students served by over 150 PreK-12 Catholic schools in Maryland.

House Bill 704 seeks to expand educational options for lower and middle-income Maryland students through the provision of education savings accounts. Accounts funded by the state, can be used for tuition for new educational opportunities, such as attendance at a nonpublic school of their parents choosing. Thirteen states have similar programs.

Through expanding options for parents, this program could act to ease the burden on the state's public schools. Affording parents and students expanded educational options can help to alleviate some of the overcrowding in our public schools. Increasing nonpublic enrollments through options for lower-income students will also improve the stability of the state's nonpublic schools, thus acting to preserve or increase the \$1.5 *billion* saved by taxpayers *every year* due to their presence in the educational landscape as a vital complement to its public schools.

It is also important to note that, through this program, no money is given directly to nonpublic schools, but rather directly to parents, much like many of the services for low-income people provided by our state and federal governments. The state owes a duty to ensure all of Maryland's children are afforded the educational opportunities best suited to their needs. Moreover, the duty is heightened when it comes to providing those options, and a corresponding pathway out of poverty, for lower-income students. This program would be one important step in fulfilling those duties.

Approval for parent choice programs is at an all-time high post-pandemic. It is for this and the other aforementioned reasons that the Maryland Catholic Conference urges a favorable report for House Bill 704.