



SENATE BUDGET & TAXATION SUBCOMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 7, 2024

SENATE BILL 552

OPERATING BUDGET – FUNDING – SCHOLARSHIPS FOR NONPUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

**TESTIMONY OF RABBI ARIEL SADWIN,
DIRECTOR, AGUDATH ISRAEL OF MARYLAND**

SUPPORT

Agudath Israel of Maryland (AIMD), the Mid-Atlantic regional office for Agudath Israel of America – a renown national Jewish advocacy organization, speaks on behalf of the Orthodox Jewish communities across Maryland. AIMD provides support and representation for the 30 Jewish day schools that operate in our great state.

During the 2016 legislative session the General Assembly created a program in the State Budget to provide low-income (free and reduced meal eligible) families with the opportunity of selecting a school that they determine to be better suited for their children, by initiating and funding the BOOST program. While our society has always given families the right to choose *where* their child will go to receive his or her education, the associated costs to attend a nonpublic school most often makes it prohibitively difficult. With the creation of the BOOST program, the hopes and dreams of thousands of families were fulfilled with the availability of scholarship dollars to attend the eligible nonpublic school of their choosing.

Now, after eight years of the BOOST program, thanks to the great dedication of MSDE staff and the guidance of the BOOST advisory board, thousands of low-income students across minority and low-income communities have received the scholarships and are attending these participating schools. These students and their families are thrilled and ever grateful for the opportunity given to them with the scholarship grants they have received. The ever-so-modest increases in the program's funding since it began has allowed for additional funds to be provided to students with special education needs and additional dollars to help defray the higher tuition costs for high school students.

The schools that participate in this program all sign assurances that are laid out by the BOOST advisory board as per the budget language passed by the legislature. Those assurances are in place to ensure that these schools operate with full transparency in the admissions, curriculum, and performance. Participating schools undergo rigorous assessment tests documenting the achievements of their students.

With the success of the program and the great benefit it has provided Maryland children, this program is worthy of permanent inclusion in Maryland's annual Operating Budget. Senate Bill 401 seeks to codify the program in its current form with a \$10 million allocation thru FY 2026. It will increase modestly over the following few years until it reaches \$16 million in FY 2029.

As we have appealed for your support of this great program each year in its current form, we seek your support in passing SB 552 into law to allow the great program to continue the good it does for Maryland children. Thank you for your past support and thank you for your future support. Please report favorably on SB 552.