
TO: Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment
BILL: House Bill (HB) 475 - Education - Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program - Establishment (Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program Act)
DATE: March 27, 2024
POSITION: Oppose

EXPLANATION:

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and the Maryland State Board of Education (State Board) respectfully oppose House Bill (HB) 475 – Education - Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program - Establishment (Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program Act), which seeks to require MSDE to serve as the pass-through agency for the newly established Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program. The legislation also makes MSDE responsible for developing the grant application, reviewing applications, ensuring matching funds, and submitting a bi-annual report to the general assembly beginning on or before December 1, 2025.

The State Board and MSDE are dedicated to ensuring that high-quality phonics materials continue to be available for and distributed widely to Maryland families. However, as written, the proposed grant program does not bestow the necessary oversight to MSDE to assess the rigor of the developed materials. HB 475 would allow open-source phonics organizations that receive a grant to provide phonics learning materials to be used in tutoring Maryland public school students. Although MSDE would review and evaluate grant applications, the Department will not have the discretion to ensure the materials are appropriately rigorous and align with the science of reading. This introduces a risk of distributing unproven materials to families across Maryland, which MSDE regards as a version of legislating curriculum that has not been appropriately vetted by the Department.

In partnership with the General Assembly and other stakeholders, MSDE and the State Board are willing to work to develop a competitive grant program in the future that is focused on building access to phonics materials and that aligns with our shared mission, vision, and the science of reading. With the necessary guardrails in place to protect quality, MSDE will be able to hold future grant recipients accountable for how the funds are used and whether they achieve the intended goals. As proposed, the Department is concerned that there may be less incentive for recipients to innovate or continuously evaluate themselves for improvement.

The Department and the State Board respectfully request that the committee consider this information on **HB 475**. Please contact Dr. Akilah Alleyne, Executive Director of Government Affairs, Education Policy, and Government Relations, at Akilah.alleyne@maryland.gov or at 410-767-0504 or Zach Hands, Executive Director of the State Board, at Zachary.hands1@maryland.gov or at 443-915-6094, if you would like any additional information.