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**Board of Education of Howard County
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland Senate,
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
March 27, 2024**

HB0558: UNFAVORABLE

**Primary and Secondary Education - Comprehensive Health Education Framework –
Established**

The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) opposes **HB0558 Primary and Secondary Education - Comprehensive Health Education Framework – Established** as a mandate on local school system curriculum.

HB0558 requires the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), in consultation with the Maryland Department of Health, to develop a comprehensive Health Education framework that included topics currently found in the [Maryland Comprehensive Health Education Framework](#), which was last adopted by the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBE) in June 2021. The bill additionally calls on local boards of education to adopt policies, guidelines, and procedures for a parent or guardian to opt out of the Family Life and Human Sexuality unit. A local board could not authorize a parent or guardian to opt a student out of education related to HIV or AIDs prevention. Annually, local boards of education are required to report to MSDE on the actions taken to comply with the requirements of the bill.

While the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) health staff and the Board support comprehensive instruction in Health Education and the intent of HB0558, and currently follow the Framework adopted by MSBE, preserving local control in the implementation of health curriculum is imperative. HB0558 is both redundant of, and contradictory to, current Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR). Currently families can opt out of the Family Life and Human Sexuality unit, which has course objectives about HIV and AIDs. There are also course objectives for HIV and AIDs in the Disease Prevention unit, which does not allow for a family to opt out.

The amendment to remove the provision of HB0558 that allowed families to opt out of “gender identity and sexual orientation topics” in each grade in which those topics are taught is an improvement. Currently, these words are woven throughout the Framework. For example, the elementary objective 1a.5.13 states "Explain why it is wrong to tease or bully others based on personal characteristics such as body type, race, gender, sexuality, appearance, mannerisms, and the way one dresses or acts." While perhaps an unintended consequence of the bill, allowing families to opt out of each unit/lesson containing these topics would have meant students would miss other important health education instruction and may lead to logistical impacts in handling all such requests per unit.

As a legislative platform, however, the Board supports local decision-making in the development of curriculum and policy that account for a balance of educational practices, available resources, public input, and accountability that is informed and guided by State Board established standards and models, rather than legislative mandates. Legislation that limits local board decision-making authority may weaken the Board’s bond with the local community and adversely impact the community’s participation in the governance and operation of the school system. For these reasons, we urge an UNFAVORABLE report of HB0558 from this Committee.