

TITLE: Primary and Secondary Students - Vision and Hearing Studies and Evaluations
DATE: February 21, 2024
POSITION: SUPPORT
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports House Bill 893. MABE, on behalf of local school systems, looks forward to participating in the studies called for in this legislation toward the goal of improving services for students with hearing and vision needs.

For many years, MABE has engaged with advocates and testified on legislation proposing to significantly expand the scope of mandated school-based vision screenings, and dictate very prescriptive procedures and vision services in response to student behaviors. MABE consistently notes that any mandated expansion of the annual vision screening would impact both local school systems and county health departments, both of which are required to provide vision screenings to students as specified in the law.

House Bill 893 would reasonably require the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), in collaboration with the Maryland Department of Health (MDH), to convene a workgroup to study and make recommendations on vision and hearing supports and services for students. In addition, the bill would require the Maryland State School Health Council to evaluate issues regarding vision and hearing difficulties in primary and secondary students.

MABE generally supports maintaining the current law, under §7-404 of the Education Article, which requires student hearing and vision screenings. For many years the requirements were for grades four, five, or six and grade nine. More recently these requirements were updated to require vision screenings upon entering school, in grade one, and grade eight or nine. However, MABE is aware of the desire to reinstitute a mandated annual vision screening in either third or fourth grade. One purpose of the study called for in this bill would be to model the costs for doing so, in order to establish funding and budget expectations for the state, local school systems, and local health departments, and other costs depending on the expanded scope of programs and services.

MABE supports a statewide approach to setting standards for student health screenings that ensures the timely assessment of each student's hearing and vision health condition. Following the studies called for in House Bill 893, MABE looks forward to the implementation of meaningful reforms that are fully funded to support the work of the state and local agencies involved in serving our families and students with hearing and vision needs.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on House Bill 893.