



SB 429: Excellence in Maryland Public Schools Act
February 19, 2025
Position: Oppose

The Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition (MDAC) is a coalition of the five Down syndrome organizations in Maryland as well as individuals with Down syndrome and their family members who have come together to advocate for improved quality of life for all individuals with Down syndrome throughout the state of Maryland.

MDAC strongly opposes SB429, which would: cut the promised foundation per pupil amounts for all K-12 public school students every year from FY2026 through FY2033; cut the amount of funding promised to Maryland's 621 community schools for FY2027 through FY2031; and cut the annual funding for behavioral health supports through the Consortium for Community Supports by 70%. The cumulative loss of approximately \$7 billion of funding over eight years represents an **unprecedented disinvestment from Maryland's public schools.**

SB429 purports to "hold harmless" students who receive special education services by changing the current special education weight to dollar amounts based on the foundation and weights in current law. **While the bucket of funding for students who receive special education services may be held harmless, actual students with disabilities will be gravely harmed.** These students will, like all students, have their foundation allocation cut. Students with disabilities who are also eligible for compensatory education funding, eligible for multilingual learner funding, or attend community schools (i.e., those with high concentrations of poverty) will be impacted multiple times over. Students with disabilities are disproportionately economically disadvantaged,¹ and they and their school communities will be irreparably harmed by these cuts.

MDAC is also deeply concerned by the proposed four-year delay to initiating the phase-in of Collaborative Time. Collaborative Time is the programmatic element of the Blueprint law that is most likely to have a significant positive impact on improving the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

First, structures and systems that explicitly support **collaboration of general and special educators will contribute to dismantling the silos between general and special education, one of the biggest barriers to progress for students with disabilities.** Collaborative Time will allow educators, together, to reflect on student data, plan instruction, fill gaps in their knowledge and skills through professional learning, and provide direct support to individual and small groups of students. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) identifies this type of collaboration as High Leverage Practice # 1, noting that it is "one of the most essential practices to master because it is

¹ In 2021-22, 36.7% of students with disabilities vs. 27.2% of all students are economically disadvantaged. See slide 21 in <https://blueprint.marylandpublicschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/05/8.23.23SpecialEducationWorkgroup-A.pdf>

one of the HLPs used every single day regardless of grade level, content area, or disability status of students.”²

Second, **Collaborative Time is a research-based strategy for teacher retention.** In January 2025 the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the US Department of Education issued a Dear Colleague letter on special education personnel retention, which is one cause of critical shortages of special educators in Maryland and across the country. OSEP in collaboration with the CEEDAR and LEAD IDEA Centers launched *Principal Navigator: Special Educator Retention*,³ which includes a toolkit of short-, medium-, and long-term strategies for “establishing and protecting planning and collaboration time.” This toolkit⁴ includes a wide variety of research and best practices that do not involve additional teachers, but instead rely on scheduling strategies, use of non-instructional staff, and enrichment or intervention time with outside partners or other non-teaching staff. It is disingenuous to suggest that we can’t implement collaborative time without first solving the teacher shortage. These strategies are known, replicable, achievable, and cost-effective.⁵

By providing a menu of possibilities to LEAs and schools based on these best practices, Maryland could initiate Collaborative Time across the state in Fall 2025 as intended by the Blueprint.⁶ SB429 instead proposes repurposing some of the intended funding for a Collaborative Time Innovation Grant program which would dilute the funding’s impact, adding a new layer of central administration—with requirements for developing grant applications, application evaluations, and reporting. The “innovative ideas in the bill point to an obvious fact: We know how to innovate Collaborative Time in ways that do not require first hiring thousands of new teachers.

At the same time, MSDE could develop a statewide plan with benchmark objectives for reaching our ultimate goals in terms of producing a diverse, effective, and stable teacher workforce through intentional recruitment and retention strategies. The alternative (delaying collaborative time and cutting the funding) shortchanges children and teachers and will fundamentally set back the goals of the Blueprint, perhaps irretrievably.

SB429 proposes using other diverted funds for a “recruitment campaign,” focused on marketing and individual recruitment of teachers from outside the state. But such campaign will simply throw good money after bad unless we execute retention strategies that go to the heart of working conditions. We will never pipeline our way out of the teacher shortage. Oddly, the goal of the recruitment initiatives in SB429 is the reduction of “the number of conditionally licensed teachers”—yet growing that number has been Maryland’s primary strategy employed to date via

²<https://exceptionalchildren.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/HLP%201%20Admin%20Guide.pdf>

³ <https://lead-idea.org/navigator/retention>

⁴ (<https://lead-idea.org/resources/toolkit-2-promoting-shared-ownership-and-collaboration>

⁵ Rosenberg, D., Daigneau, R., & Galvez, R. (2018). Finding Time for Collaborative Planning. Education Research Strategies. <https://www.erstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/3876-finding-time-for-collaborative-planning.pdf>

⁶ An example is Fairfax County, VA, which started an early release initiative to provide time for collaborative planning and to complete state-mandated professional development on literacy instruction. They established partnerships with local organizations—including Boys and Girls clubs, Girl and Boy Scouts, STEM groups, and others—to help provide supervision and programs for students, and used central office staff members to help care for students while teachers work. See: Peetz, C, (2024, Aug 28). An Unconventional Way One District Is Adding Teacher Planning Time, *EdWeek*, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/an-unconventional-way-one-district-is-adding-teacher-planning-time/2024/08>

Grow-Your-Own (GYO) programs. Conditionally licensed teachers are a pool of Maryland residents who have already committed to teaching and who are more diverse than our licensed workforce; our goal should be to help them get fully licensed. That effort should include collaborative time—a real investment in developing these educators.

In sum, this plan of short-term redirection of funds and long-term disinvestment spells disaster for the success of the Blueprint. We can do better. We have a plan, the evidence, the people, and for the next two years we have the Blueprint Fund to pay for it. All we need is a revitalized commitment. We can transform Maryland's public schools for all students, including students with disabilities.

For these reasons, MDAC strongly opposes SB429 and urges the General Assembly to stay the course and keep the promise of the Blueprint to Maryland's students and educators.

Respectfully submitted,

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