

Testimony in **OPPOSITION of
Senate 429: Excellence in Maryland Public Schools Act**

Budget and Taxation Committee/Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: **Oppose**

February 12, 2025

As a former Community School Coordinator, I have seen firsthand how critical it is for schools to have the necessary resources to meet the unique needs of their students and families, particularly in high-poverty areas. Freezing the increases in the Concentration of Poverty Per Pupil Funding as proposed in SB429 will undermine the progress we've made in supporting vulnerable students and families academically, socially and economically. I am submitting this testimony **in strong opposition to Senate Bill 429**, which would significantly cut promised education funding under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. Community schools play a vital role in providing wraparound services that address academic, social, and emotional needs, while also serving as a community hub. These funds are essential for community schools to engage with local resources, build strong partnerships, and provide targeted support to students who face significant barriers to success. Without this funding, we risk compromising the opportunities for our most underserved students to thrive.

The importance of community schools was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they became lifelines for students, families and their local communities navigating an unprecedented crisis. In times of uncertainty, like the current landscape, structures like community schools are more important than ever. They provide a foundation of support, offering children, families and communities the resources, stability, and care they need to navigate challenging times. Freezing these funds now would create an even greater challenge for Maryland's most vulnerable communities, stripping away the crucial support systems that have proven essential in times of local and national uncertainty. We must stay the course with community schools, ensuring that they continue to provide the structure, resources, and holistic supports that our students and families need to succeed.

At the University of Maryland School of Social Work/The Center for Restorative Change, we work in partnership with 11 Baltimore City Public Schools in supporting the community schools strategy with the Positive Schools Center. The PSC creates positive, supportive, and mindful learning communities where students and school staff connect, develop, and grow. We partner with schools and districts to address punitive discipline and dysfunctional school climates. The foundation of our work is built on a strong racial justice understanding and equity focus. Together, we approach school change through embedding restorative approaches, trauma-responsive strategies, social-emotional learning, and community voice into their routines, policies, and culture. Our schools are environments where students, adults, and community members feel safe and can flourish. School teams have the expertise and training to build strong, dynamic relationships and sustain high student and staff attendance, continually decrease suspension rates and office referrals, and boost academic achievement.

Here are key testimonials from Community School Coordinators that assess strengths and risks in each of our community schools:

George Washington Elementary #22

My name is Latoria Jones, and I am a Community School Coordinator at George Washington Elementary in Southwest Baltimore. At George Washington Elementary School, we are proud to serve a diverse and vibrant community where every child's success matters. The Concentration of Poverty Grant funding plays a crucial role in making sure we meet the needs of our students and their families, offering them opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable. If we lose this funding, we risk undermining the

very programs that help our students thrive academically, socially, and personally. Thanks to the Concentration of Poverty Grant, our school can provide essential programming such as after-school sports, enrichment activities, and educational field trips. The grant allows us to offer additional academic support, including tutoring, after-school programs, and theater opportunities, all designed to enhance learning and foster creativity. These activities promote not only academic excellence but also emotional and social development. Students who participate in out of school time activities are proven to have higher academic achievement, better behavior, and improved social skills.

We will lose a key part of our approach to educating the whole child if we lose funding for these programs and services. The community school initiative relies on wraparound services to address the diverse needs of our students. The funding helps us provide these comprehensive services and ensures that no child is left behind. The Concentration of Poverty Grant is more than just a source of funding, it is an investment in the future of our children and our community. Without this critical funding, we would be unable to provide the services that are essential to our students' academic success and personal growth.

Joseph C. Briscoe Academy #345

My name is La'Nia Latimer, and I am a Community School Coordinator at Joseph C. Briscoe Academy located in West Baltimore. I am submitting this testimony **in strong opposition to Senate Bill 429**, which would significantly cut promised education funding under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. This bill undermines the investments our state has committed to making in our students, our teachers, and the future of our communities. Delays in funding for community schools will widen the achievement gap and leave vulnerable students without essential support systems. Schools that were promised additional resources through Concentration of Poverty grants will not receive the funds when they need them most. These grants provide critical services such as mental health care, and extracurricular programming and activities.

As an alternative school, we already operate with limited resources. We rely on this funding to provide students with opportunities for cultural field trips, weekly snowboarding trips, and other experiential learning activities that support both academic growth and behavioral improvement. These trips serve as incentives, encouraging positive behavior and engagement in school. If this funding is delayed for two years, it will effectively eliminate these programs, depriving our students of valuable experiences that enhance their education and development. This will have a direct and lasting impact on their motivation, well-being, and overall success.

Elmer A. Henderson: A Johns Hopkins Partnership School #368

My name is Annie Weber, and I am a Community School Coordinator at Elmer A. Henderson in East Baltimore. The Excellence in Maryland Public Schools Act presents a significant threat to the mental health and well-being of students, especially in community schools that rely on targeted resources to support their diverse needs. By decreasing funding for mental health services, the state is neglecting the rising mental health challenges students face, especially those from underfunded and high-poverty schools. Mental health counselors and school-based therapists are essential in helping students cope with trauma, stress, and the emotional challenges they face daily.

Reducing funding for these services compromises students' ability to succeed academically and socially, as their mental health needs go unmet. Moreover, the lack of adequate mental health support will likely contribute to higher absenteeism, behavioral issues, and a decline in overall school performance. At Henderson Hopkins, our once part-time mental health staff had such overwhelming demand that a full-time Mental Health Therapist was necessary to meet even part of those needs. Even with a full-time Therapist and our full-time Social Worker and School Psychologist, over 50 students in need of grief and loss support went unserved due to insufficient staffing. As of now, our mental health staff must focus on

only the most severe mental health, grief, and behavioral cases while hundreds of other students who need mental health support continue to go unserved. Our Climate & Culture Team support staff (behavioral support team) have been significantly overworked in their efforts to assist teachers by managing students in crisis throughout the school day. Their dedication has been invaluable, contributing to the safety of both students and staff, enabling teachers to perform their duties more effectively, and fostering notable improvements in the behavior of students who are struggling.

In addition to cuts in mental health funding, the proposed freezing of parts of the Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program will disproportionately harm schools in lower-income areas that depend on this support to provide equitable educational opportunities. These schools often face additional challenges, including higher dropout rates, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of resources, all exacerbated by limited funding. The community school model has proven effective in reducing all these factors, leading to improved opportunities for students, families, and communities. This not only offers benefits to student well-being but improves the future of Baltimore City.

We do know that at Henderson-Hopkins, our after-school budget will decrease by nearly \$20,000+ next year. Reducing funding for afterschool programs, crucial in keeping students engaged and supported outside of traditional school hours, will leave many children without positive outlets for learning and growth. After-school programs offer safe spaces from 4-6 PM, relieving stress on working parents, and inspiring children's passions to motivate them to achieve in and out of school. These cuts will only deepen the divide between schools in affluent areas and those in marginalized communities, undermining the state's commitment to educational equity and leaving struggling schools without the resources they need to improve student outcomes. The state would see an increase in youth at risk, lowered student achievement, and a weaker workforce. These factors will ultimately result in higher long-term costs for the city, while also sending a message to our student body that their well-being is not a priority. Out of 190 responses to Henderson-Hopkins' annual budget survey this year, we saw that families' top 2 priorities were maintaining the quality and number of offerings of our after-school programming as well as the need for mental health support in schools. If the state makes the decision to cut funding for schools and community schools, it will be going against the expressed needs of our children and families.

Renaissance Academy #433

My name is Felicia Moore, and I am a Community School Coordinator at Renaissance Academy in West Baltimore. Renaissance Academy represents hundreds of Maryland high schools that are in a state of urgency with setting up our youth for post-secondary success. We heavily rely on the concentration of poverty funds to help mitigate barriers that impact educational experiences. Funding community schools is crucial for high schools because it ensures that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality education. Well-funded schools can provide better resources, such as college & career readiness, advanced technology, extracurricular programs, and specialized teachers. Moreover, concentration of poverty funds help minimize communal issues such as crime and homelessness by reducing barriers that hinder our youth's flow of knowledge. These resources are essential for fostering an environment that promotes academic success, and personal development. Additionally, community school funding allows for smaller class sizes, which can lead to more individualized attention for students, enhancing learning outcomes. Overall, investing in community schools also helps create access to opportunities, bridging the gap between underfunded areas and wealthier districts, thus contributing to stronger, more prosperous communities in the long term.

Westport Academy #225

Westport Academy is a Pre-K-8 community school in Baltimore City. Within the Westport community, there are 2 convenience shops with no access to grocery stores located within 4 miles. The school has been able to provide weekend backpacks with food and snacks for students and families. Delays in funding for community schools will widen the achievement gap and leave vulnerable students without the necessary support systems and basic needs. These grants provide essential services such as food from partnerships, mental health care, after-school programs, special education services, and multilingual support for students. Freezing these funds now would create an even greater challenge for Maryland's most vulnerable communities.

Creative City Public Charter School #384

Creative City Public Charter School is a progressive charter elementary school in Northwest Baltimore City. With small classes and a focus on the arts, students connect with nature and their community through hands-on projects and exploration. This unique approach to education has established Creative City as an anchor institution in the Park Heights community. Creative City is home to several resources, partnerships, and opportunities aimed at providing expansive opportunities to our students and their families - opportunities that simply cannot exist without the continuation of the Blueprint funding. Reducing our already tight budget would be detrimental to the wellbeing of not only our students, but the Park Heights community, leaving countless families searching for accessible resources. We urge you to please consider the historic disinvestment that not only our community, but so many of our neighboring communities, have faced and make the decision to continue full funding so that we can continue the irreplaceable work that is being done.

Augusta Fells Institute of Visual Arts #430

At Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts (AFSIVA), we strive to enrich each student's academic life with a blend of comprehensive art skills and STEM education. Research shows that this approach of blending art and science increases student's ability to think critically and creatively, which in turn better prepares them for life post-high school graduation. With opportunities from sports teams to a student art gallery, and access to dozens of community partners, AFSIVA truly serves as a hub for the needs of our students and their families. As a community school, we support the entire family, not just the student. This holistic approach allows families to be fully engaged while having their needs met. Cutting funding to schools such as ours would be detrimental to the well-being of the hundreds of students that we serve, as well as their families, and thus our communities at large. We urge you to please oppose these budget cuts and consider the wellbeing of our student's, their families, and our collective future.

The Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School #122

At The Historic Samuel Coleridge Taylor Elementary School (HSCT), our mission is to guarantee that every student attains college or career readiness through grade-level or above achievement. We achieve this through differentiated instruction, strategic interventions, and a collaborative and supportive environment that fosters rigor and engagement. Our vision is to be a united community of teachers, families, and students dedicated to nurturing the holistic development of each child—mind, body, and

spirit. Family members have stressed the need for more youth programs and diverse recreational activities for their children. This resonates with a holistic approach to education, recognizing the importance of extracurricular activities in fostering personal development and overall well-being. Freezing per pupil funding will significantly impact how schools can ultimately meet their goals in providing well-rounded educational opportunities for our students.

Glenmount Elementary/Middle School #235

The proposed adjustments to educational funding in Maryland will have a significant impact on schools like Glenmount Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore City. These changes would directly affect our ability to provide essential resources and support for our students, families, and community. As a community school, we rely on funding to ensure that every student has access to high-quality education, enrichment programs, and critical services that help address barriers to learning. Our students benefit greatly from initiatives such as academic interventions, mental health support, and family engagement programs—all of which would be at risk if these changes are implemented, reducing opportunities for student success. Additionally, modifying revenue sources for the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Fund could shift financial priorities away from the schools that need support the most, further widening educational inequities.

At Glenmount, we serve a diverse and hardworking community, and we recognize how crucial adequate funding is for the success of our students and families. Investing in community schools means investing in the future of our children by ensuring they have the necessary resources to thrive academically and personally. We urge you to reconsider these proposed funding changes and continue prioritizing the needs of students in Baltimore City and beyond.

Matthew A. Henson Elementary School #29

Matthew A. Henson Elementary School is a resilient staple in its historic West Baltimore community. The school currently serves Pre-k through 5th grade students and provides eight after-school programs which include coding, STEM, extended literacy support, male mentoring, girl mentoring, choir, and entrepreneurship. The caregivers and students appreciate these programs as they are robust and support the community school strategy in enhanced academics and enrichment. Parents have reflected on their scholar's academic improvement while attending Matthew A. Henson's afterschool programs through surveys and community needs assessments. Concentration of Poverty Per Pupil funding allows our students to receive the necessary academic support and enrichment.

Booker T. Washington Middle School #130

My name is Shakira Hopper, and I am a Community School Coordinator at Booker T. Washington Middle School in West Baltimore. Taking away funds from community schools such as Booker T. Washington Middle School for the Arts can have a detrimental impact on the quality of resources available to students, their families and staff. Here at Booker T. Washington Middle School for the Arts, we primarily support and service those in low-income or underserved areas, who also rely heavily on government funding to maintain essential services like teacher salaries, extracurricular programs, and learning materials. A reduction in these funds can result in attendance barriers, limited access to technology, and a decrease in the availability of academic support services. Students in our school may face challenges in receiving the individual attention and resources they need to succeed, ultimately widening the achievement gap between wealthier and less privileged communities.

Furthermore, cutting funding to our community school can also lead to the loss of vital support systems that help foster a positive learning environment through our community school strategy via college and career readiness, community support such as our monthly food distribution and partnering organization. Our school uses this budget to provide mental health services, after-school programs, and community outreach initiatives that benefit both students and their families. When these services are scaled back, students may lack the emotional and social support needed to thrive academically and personally. Additionally, the loss of community school coordinator's due to budget cuts can cause a decline in morale, negatively affecting the school climate and the overall educational experience as we serve as a trusted and reliable contact throughout the school. In the long run, the disinvestment in community schools can perpetuate cycles of inequality, leaving disadvantaged students at a significant disadvantage in terms of educational outcomes and future opportunities.

In summary, Maryland made a commitment to improving education through the Blueprint, but SB429 weakens these efforts when schools need support the most. Rather than cutting funding, the legislature should uphold its promise to students, educators, and families by maintaining the investments that were pledged. I urge you to reject Senate Bill 429 and prioritize the future of Maryland's students - prioritize generating progressive revenue through the passage of Fair Share Maryland. Cutting funding now will have long-term consequences that harm not just our schools, but our communities as a whole. Please vote no on SB429 and stand with those who believe in fully funding the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Aneuri Castro, LMSW
University of Maryland School of Social Work
The Center for Restorative Change
Positive Schools Center