



Senate Bill 429

Excellence in Maryland Public Schools Act

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**
WITH AMENDMENTS

To: Budget and Taxation and Education,
Energy, and the Environment Committees

Date: February 19, 2025

From: Sarah Sample and Kevin Kinnally

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** SB 429, **WITH AMENDMENTS**. This bill adjusts the State's visionary education plan, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Blueprint). The primary goals of the proposed legislation focus on bolstering efforts in recruitment and retention for certified teachers as well as pausing and scaling back certain elements to adjust strategies.

The proposal to pause collaborative time as well as flat-fund the community schools will allow state and local officials to focus first on some of the missing pieces that will enhance the strategy and framework for those programs long term. While those provisions of the bill do not have a significant immediate impact on county finances, they could allow for school systems to focus on the most pressing challenges immediately, and continue to work toward the broader goals of the Blueprint. Expending resources and mandating progress before the appropriate foundation is in place will only serve to undermine the long-term success of those programs by developing them on precarious footing. Significant reforms, as those prescribed by the Blueprint, hold great promise but must be built to last. Taking time to do it correctly rather than immediately, regardless of obstacles, will serve students, educators, and communities better in the long run.

These shifts have the potential to come at a time when the Blueprint plan faces an environment unlike anything envisioned during its initial forecasts. The pandemic, labor market, and cost drivers have altered the underpinning of this landmark effort. County governments have been funding partners, making record-setting financial commitments over three years of the roll-out, with the vast majority of jurisdictions funding well over their local share of Blueprint costs. Even with these historic investments, education experts from across the state have highlighted challenges both operational and financial that could compromise the shared outcomes of the plan.

While counties appreciate the Governor's willingness to bring the Blueprint into alignment with fiscal and implementation realities, the expense to taxpayers is still great. The investments in education must continue to comply with the strictest transparency and accountability standards, especially as progress

relates to the new investments SB 429 demands. To this end, counties respectfully request an amendment to the bill to require the Maryland State Department of Education to report annually on progress in recruitment and retention that are specific to the proposed adjustments.

SB 429 also presents an opportunity to address other obvious and demonstrated challenges of the Blueprint. There has been a substantial, and in some instances unnecessary, degree of burden that local school systems have endured due to the overly prescriptive nature of Blueprint funding. Superintendents have made clear that the funding formula and strategy is a one-size-fits-all approach that lacks an understanding and appreciation for the diversity of communities across Maryland.

School leaders across the jurisdictions have respectfully requested, and counties echo that request here, to give more flexibility on allocating and reporting funding in certain instances. Specifically, an amendment to SB 429 that allows financial reporting to be aggregated at the school level rather than by Blueprint category would ease compliance significantly, and maintain the integrity of the mandate that 75% of funding follow students to their schools. The second amendment request is to provide a waiver for small schools to exceed the 75/25 mandate if they have 350 or fewer students. This will help relieve some of the severe funding deficiencies that understandably persist in schools that fall outside the effective recognition of the current funding formula.

SB 429, with the reasonable changes outlined above, can ensure accountability for taxpayer dollars but also provide local school systems with the flexibility necessary to ensure the reform plan can, and will, actually work for all students. Accordingly, MACo urges a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** report for **SB 429**.