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BILL: SB 429/HB 504  
TITLE: Excellence in Maryland Public Schools Act  
DATE: February 19, 2025  
POSITION: Favorable with Amendments  
COMMITTEE: Senate Budget and Taxation & Education, Energy, and the Environment Committees  
House Appropriations and Ways and Means Committees  
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The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents, **supports SB 429/HB 504 with amendments.**

This omnibus bill makes significant changes to funding formulas enacted as part of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, creates new programs related to literacy initiatives and teacher recruitment, makes changes to the community schools program, and requires a study on special education funding.

We appreciate the Governor's interest in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and his desire to incorporate additional initiatives to enhance student success, but as the leaders on the front lines of Maryland's 10-year education reform we can only offer limited support for this legislation. Anticipating the Administration's desire for changes to the Blueprint due to the State's looming fiscal crisis, we asked the Governor last fall for a seat at the table to identify solutions that would not hinder the long-term success of the Blueprint, namely, solutions that would continue to support student growth and academic achievement.

Unfortunately, this legislation does not protect the progress we have made, and seriously jeopardizes the transformational vision of the Blueprint.

Despite our frustrations and criticisms of this legislation, we strongly request the opportunity to work with the Governor and the General Assembly to craft solutions and modifications that are achievable, ensure the highest return on Blueprint investments, maximize efficiencies, and maintain the promise and momentum of the early successes of the Blueprint.

### **Pausing Collaborative Time and Commensurate Funding Changes**

This legislation makes significant funding changes by altering the target per pupil “foundation” funding starting in Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 through FY 2030 by delaying the “collaborative time” initiative by four years; provisions are made to hold special education funding harmless. The legislation creates new Collaborative Time Innovation Demonstration Grants over the same four year period to test innovative teacher collaboration models. Funding can be used for compensation for additional staff, planning of new master schedules, professional development, technical assistance, and other uses approved by MSDE. To be eligible, an application must be co-signed with a local employee organization.

**PSSAM strongly opposes the delay in collaborative time and the commensurate funding reductions, as well as the development of the Demonstration Grants. The projected loss of State funding under this proposal is estimated to total \$1.557 billion, with an additional loss of \$1.167 billion of locally required spending, resulting in a four-year reduction of \$2.724 billion in direct funding to schools.**

The Blueprint’s vision for collaborative time was ambitious, creating an eight-year phase-in to reach the ultimate goal of achieving 60% of a teacher’s time in front of students, and 40% of their time devoted to collaborative work. The Kirwan Commission’s consideration of “collaborative time” was always more expansive than just hiring new teachers. In fact, suitable activities for the 40% of time centered around deepening LEA leadership development and professional learning opportunities, as well as traditional individual “planning time” understood by most laypeople.

In fact, part of the 40% time envisioned small group support, including:

- Working with students struggling to meet college and career readiness;
- Interventions for families and students suffering from chronic absenteeism;
- High leverage tutoring opportunities;
- Co-teaching/modeling for special education and multilingual learners (MLL);
- Time for IEP and MLL-plan work and support;
- More special education and MLL classroom support staff, especially for newer or conditionally hired teachers;
- Peer observations to see model lessons;
- Behavioral supports for students (more adults in a classroom to allow for more small group rotations and other supports);

- Working with students and families needing social-emotional supports;
- Collaborative time with paras and teaching assistants to ensure that they are prepared for instructional support;
- Support for conditionally hired teachers and those teaching outside of their certification areas; and,
- Restorative practice interventions with staff who have specific training.

Clearly the Kirwan Commission’s intention was not just hiring more teachers.

It is very important to recognize that the best recruitment is retention of teachers. And the phased in funding is so important to retaining staff as you grow your workforce and change staffing configurations. The biggest issue here is that when LEAs strive to reach 60% of teaching time, they need the funding flexibility to grow into those structures. Schools are constantly reallocating staffing in grades and classes to account for discrepancies in teacher tenure, expertise, curriculum, etc. So at any given time, you have classes that are under the teacher-student ratio and some that are slightly over, but you need the funding to cover the transition - the phase-in - not requiring the hiring of a massive amount of new teachers at once. However, stopping the funding will delay the progress in reaching the expected teaching/planning ratios.

The early funding priorities of the Blueprint were to bolster the teaching profession, including the requirement to increase teacher salaries by 10% by July 1, 2024, compared to their salaries on June 30, 2019, as well as provide incentives for the attainment of National Board Certification, and reaching a minimum salary of \$60,000 by FY 2027. Teacher recruitment has always been a priority and year-round activity for LEAs, but the pandemic dealt a significant blow to these efforts.

Regardless, local school systems have been working hard to achieve these goals in the first three years of the implementation, while planning for the eight-year phase-in of collaborative time. In fact, for almost a year, LEAs and their staff have been requesting guidance and direction from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) on the expectations for the phase-in because local implementation plans of collaborative time are due July 1, 2025. LEA staff and superintendents have made it explicitly clear that these plans will take time to create, and need to be negotiated with their bargaining units; negotiations started in earnest in early fall 2025 for the FY 2026 budget.

**Never once was there a formal or explicit indication or expectation that 15,000 teachers would need to be hired by the full phase-in of the plan, OR that significant hiring would be required in the early years of implementation.**

Without clear direction or engagement from either entity, LEAs began conversations with their bargaining units and made assumptions of what would be expected in these early years. LEAs reasonably expected their July 1, 2025 plans would include laying the foundation for the implementation, including:

- Assessment of current teaching/collaborative time for each grade band;
- Master planning ideas to accomplish innovative ideas such as co-teaching, small group configurations for differentiated learning; alternative support staffing models; hybrid learning models across grade levels; the use of outside resources to allow for more flexibility for classroom teachers, such as tutoring programs;
- Short and long-term staff recruitment and retention, including creative partnerships with local teacher preparation programs and institutes of higher education to develop workforce pipelines for local shortages or priorities; and,
- Space considerations (facility needs).

In fact, the AIB currently has several consultants working directly with LEAs assessing the actual staffing needs. This work should more accurately estimate, with real time data, projected teacher needs. We suspect this exercise will yield a much more realistic number than 15,000 teachers needed.

The teacher shortage is not new - not in 2025 and not even in 2016 when the Kirwan Commission began its work. In fact, MSDE has been collecting data on the shortage since 1996. **The justification for pausing our collaborative time work because we need to hire 15,000 teachers is unfair and sets the stage for LEA failure.** The health of the Blueprint funding is in trouble, but to use this false narrative to undergird and justify the reductions that will be faced by local school systems is wholly unfair and unsupported without localized evidence and data.

**The decision to “pause” collaborative time was made by the AIB at a single, quasi public meeting in January, 2025 without any opportunity for meaningful input by stakeholders.**

The AIB leadership has criticized our organization for recommendations we published last December; but taken together, all thirty of our recommendations would not alter the vision or faithful implementation of the Blueprint compared to this single change that will irrevocably halt the success and momentum of the Blueprint. This policy decision to pause collaborative time has been the single biggest change made to the Blueprint to date. Again, made without serious or meaningful public discourse by educators, advocates, but most significantly without input from the superintendents who have been diligently requesting a seat at the table with the decision makers on ‘all-things Blueprint.’ We had no opportunity to make our case against the single most important change proposed and adopted by the AIB who are statutorily mandated to implement the Blueprint with fidelity.

We are not naive about the Blueprint's impact on the State's future fiscal health - and this proposal is not about a teacher shortage - this is about money and slowing down the cost of the Blueprint.

We are deeply frustrated at the Administration's financial solution being retroactively endorsed by the AIB through such a dramatic policy shift without any meaningful deliberation or even understanding the fiscal impact on the LEAs. This decision flies in the face of the Commission's comprehensive work and undermines the Blueprint's innovative approach that every Pillar is transformative; but, it is the coalescence of the five Pillars that creates dynamic outcomes and achievements. Removing the funding and pausing the collaborative time in Year 4 undercuts the foundation of transformation in every sense. We remain incredulous to the idea that such a diversion from the original Blueprint will go unchecked in the name of an expectation of hiring 15,000 teachers just "revealed" to the public in news stories less than three months ago.

We did not plan - or want - to have a conversation about the insufficiency of the existing Foundation funding this year. However, now faced with the losses proposed by the Governor's education bill - we are compelled to discuss the impacts on our budget on behalf of our staff and most importantly our students.

The truth is funding and student achievement go hand-in-hand and we are not going to be able to make the progress in student achievement without the Blueprint funding we have been counting on and fought for all those years ago.

Under this legislation funding is reduced resulting in a 3.11% increase in per pupil spending over FY '25. This is not an historic investment or an investment that will yield the outcomes our students deserve. To compound our distress, FY '25 was the lowest increase in per pupil funding over the 10 years of the Blueprint - a 1.7% increase in funding. Last year budgets were balanced through a variety of strategies including:

- Using reserve funds (if LEAs had any);
- Delaying the expansion of PreK;
- Increasing class sizes; and,
- Staff and teacher reductions.

But superintendents were optimistic knowing that FY '26 would return to more appropriate funding - an almost 5% increase in per pupil funding.

In Maryland, education is a shared funding obligation between state and local governments, so in addition to the scaffolding effect of reducing the Foundation funding on the compensatory education and multilingual learner formulas, there is the elimination of required local funding to schools.

***For FY '26 school systems will lose \$234 million in direct education funding for next school year.....and none of this helps the State's FY '26 budget deficit.*** Reducing the Foundation as envisioned by this legislation will result in much deeper cuts this year.

- Districts will have to cut teachers;
- Districts will have to reopen bargaining agreements regarding increased salaries in keeping with the Blueprint mandates;
- Districts will increase class sizes; and,
- Districts will see stagnant growth in student achievement.

In addition to ensuring the academic success of Maryland's students, we must voraciously advocate for adequate funding of public schools. In fact, this critical responsibility is enshrined in COMAR 4-205(g)(5): *The County Superintendent shall try in every way to awaken public interest and improve educational conditions....* and in COMAR 4-205(k)(2): *The County Superintendent shall seek in every way to secure adequate funds from local authorities for the support and development of the public schools....* We take these responsibilities seriously and will continue to advocate for necessary resources to ensure student success.

### **Concentration of Poverty (CPG)/Community Schools**

This legislation proposes a pause in the expansion of community schools that will “save” the State \$473 million over the original, promised Blueprint funding. This is done by freezing funding at FY '26 levels for two years; funding will resume in FY '29 based on the amount the eligible school would have received in FY '27. The bill allows for district-wide use of up to 50% of the funding for school systems with more than two community schools. It expands the definition of “wrap-around services” by community schools to include anything identified by MSDE in guidance or regulation, as well as specific expansions to include (1) increased behavioral and physical health services; (2) chronic absenteeism intervention programs; (3) increasing the number of highly qualified teachers; and, (4) community-based educational and workforce training for families. Lastly, the bill shifts regulatory oversight and compliance from the AIB to the MSDE, giving MSDE the authority to issue requirements for community schools' implementation plans to include measurable goals, and to review plans annually instead of every 3 years. The MSDE is authorized to withhold funding or take other compliance actions, and can hire additional employees to provide direct guidance to local school systems. The bill redirects \$8.2 million over four years to MSDE to support these increased responsibilities.

**PSSAM is supportive of the operational and oversight changes to MSDE, as well as the expanded uses of the community schools funding, but opposes the pause in Community Schools funding for two years.**

For the last two years, our organization has strongly requested flexibility in community schools funding. We have been very pleased with the exponential growth in community schools and the corresponding academic improvements and positive community impact. This bill very astutely recognizes that allowing districts to use some of this funding for district-wide activities will yield tremendous economies of scale and enhance best practices and cooperation in school systems. Further, we strongly support the bill's recognition that a limited amount of funding should be used for fiscal management and compliance. We understand the hesitancy of funders to allow for administrative spending, but its importance has been well-documented and supported. Federal Title programs have long acknowledged the need to set aside funding for administrative tasks, such as budgeting, contracts and grant writing, to support the hands-on work. Centralizing and supporting these tasks at the district office ensures that the totality of the CPG funds are used with fidelity with the appropriate staff managing these essential funding and procurement functions. Freeing up these management burdens allows school coordinators to concentrate on engaging families, supporting students, and collaborating with community partners.

*However, we would prefer a formal triennial evaluation of each community school instead of the proposed annual evaluation; it is important to note that these schools also undergo periodic audits to ensure that funds are being spent appropriately and in accordance with their implementation plans. Community schools are also subject to annual local budget processes, which are available to the public, so there is continual oversight from the districts as well.*

*Lastly, we request that any new regulations promulgated or guidelines developed by MSDE be developed in deep consultation with the LEAs, and that any new reporting requirements are given to LEAs at least six months before they are required.*

### **Teacher Recruitment and Grow Your Own Programs**

The legislation establishes a *National Teacher Recruitment Campaign*, appropriating \$2.1 million over 4 years, as well as the *Maryland Teacher Relocation Incentive Grant* (\$4.3 million over 4 years) for out-of-state licensed teachers willing to teach in high-need schools. The bill modifies the *Grow Your Own Educators Grant Program* to focus on experiential learning pathways, minimum mentor teacher ratios and the designation of a program administrator from the local school system, funded with \$134 million of Blueprint funding over 4 years.

The legislation also implements the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact that allows teachers licensed in member states to receive equivalent licensure in Maryland without redundant testing or coursework, and provides special provisions for active military members and their spouses to expedite licensure. ***PSSAM fully supports the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact.***

As for the other teacher recruitment provisions, PSSAM appreciates the MSDE's interest in taking the lead on these teacher recruitment and training initiatives but we have serious concerns about the breadth of these new initiatives and the proposed structure of the programs. We do not believe a case has been made that the Department can more effectively manage a statewide recruitment campaign without meaningful input by the local school systems who have not been consulted at all on these new ideas. There has been no effort or outreach to determine what is already available and working in local districts that the MSDE could help support and grow. Several districts already have longstanding recruitment programs, some more generous than the proposed plan, and others that have been carefully negotiated with bargaining units. Before building a new statewide infrastructure for these efforts, it is important to understand the current efforts underway across the 24 school systems.

This is a huge amount of funding for initiatives we know nothing about and make changes to a Grow Your Own Program that was just spearheaded by MSEA, and well-deliberated and established by the General Assembly last legislative session. Without more specific information about these proposals, we cannot support them at this time. *If the General Assembly agrees that these new programs are most appropriately managed and run by the MSDE, we strongly request that General Funds are identified instead of diverting Blueprint funds to these new initiatives.*

### **The School Leadership Training Programs**

The bill also alters the leadership training programs originally envisioned by the Blueprint and amended by the Maryland General Assembly last session. The program is split into two components - the existing program becomes The School System Leadership Training Program, with required participation by local superintendents and the chair and vice chairs of a county board, as well as the State Superintendent and the leadership of the State Board and the AIB. Currently there is \$5 million budgeted for this program. The new Maryland School Leadership Academy, costing approximately \$1,250,000 a year, would be optional for principals, assistant principals, other school-based or county board leaders, or others who may benefit. The leadership academy would last for 12 months, be job-embedded, and effective school leaders will be selected as mentors who may be paid a stipend.

*PSSAM supports the leadership training programs but requests significant amendments to clarify the General Assembly's intention for these trainings.* The original intent of this training was to embed the tenets of the Blueprint in State education leaders. Last year the General Assembly made changes to the program reflecting the fact that the training was almost two years behind and expanded the training's purposes to more broadly address leadership. We feel strongly that if the General Assembly wants to incur almost \$7 million a year in training, these programs are not achieving the original, or updated goals.

Currently, these trainings are not directly related to the work of the Blueprint and largely reflect work that is done in any master's program. In fact, the Department could require that Maryland higher education programs incorporate more Blueprint specific curriculum into their programs to truly embed the Blueprint culture into future educators. We appreciate the Department's attempts to make these trainings more salient and meaningful, but we are not there yet.



As for the new Maryland School Leadership Academy, we believe principals and school-based leaders are the key to the success of the Blueprint. We would like to work in partnership with the AIB and the MSDE to fully develop professional development modules that can be deployed uniformly across the State through existing professional learning communities and opportunities. In our experiences, some of the most successful professional development programs out of the MSDE use a train-the-trainer model that can be adapted and incorporated into local school system trainings throughout the year.

In addition, the statute needs to clarify the expectations for the School System Leadership Training regarding the number of times a superintendent and board member is required to complete the training. Lastly, much of this content could be incorporated into existing leadership training conducted by State associations. For example, our organization has a year-long Aspiring Superintendents Academy, as well as aspiring principal academies run by the two Principals' Associations in Maryland. Lastly, the Maryland Association of Boards (MABE) holds annual training sessions for new and existing Board members that would be ideal to incorporate curriculum developed by the MSDE and the AIB.

### **Academic Excellence Program and Fund**

This legislation also creates the Academic Excellence Program and Fund. The Program's purpose is professional development to improve early literacy and numeracy through the use of "coordinators of professional learning" and "instructional coaches" managed by MSDE. Schools would be identified based on accountability data, and a statewide data collection initiative would be established to monitor fund usage and student outcomes. This is funded with \$228 million of Blueprint funds over four years.

**PSSAM strongly opposes the creation of this new and expansive initiative.** While literacy is certainly a key element of the Blueprint's goals, a state-led initiative such as this was never envisioned or discussed by the Kirwan Commission. This well-meaning initiative is a significant departure from the Blueprint legislation, siphoning off tremendous resources from the Blueprint Fund. We strongly oppose this funding proposal and suggest that if this is a priority of the State, it be funded with General Funds. Local superintendents cannot support redirecting promised funding to districts, in addition to what is likely to also siphon off LEA staff to move into statewide "coordinator" and "coach" positions.

### **Special Education Funding**

In addition to holding special education per-pupil funding harmless from the proposed reductions, the legislation requires an independent study on special education funding on or before January 1, 2026. In consultation with the AIB, the MSDE shall contract with an independent public or private entity and, at a minimum, review and make recommendations on (i) the costs of special education in the State; (ii) the rising costs of special education for prekindergarten students and the appropriate funding formula for those students assumed to be covered in the prekindergarten per pupil funding allocation under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future; (iii) the implications of the design assumptions in the existing special education funding

structure related to long-term spending and costs; (iv) the establishment of a system of multiple weights for special education funding based on disability and level of services and support needed.

**PSSAM strongly supports this study as it was one of our organization’s recommendations to the MSDE and AIB in the fall of 2024.** Local school systems spend over \$1,038,848,168 in direct special education services that are *NOT* reimbursed by the state and federal governments ([see linked chart](#)). Special education funding is the untold story of education funding at the local level - how this massive underfunding crowds out our ability to implement the Blueprint and “reallocate resources.” Every school system would be able to fully implement the Blueprint and exceed goals and expectations, if they were able to use the Foundation as intended, without the need to cover these profound deficits in special education.

Special education costs are **the legitimate and necessary** costs of educating our most vulnerable students; these are services that students and families are entitled to and we are committed to providing them. However, there is no denying how extraordinary these costs are, and they will continue to grow. The connecting and relevant point here is that the Kirwan Commission never truly and openly examined these costs and pressures on local education budgets. The clock was running out and the work was set aside to be dealt with by a special education work group. Years later that group is struggling to get its recommendations the attention they deserve. In the meantime, local school systems continue to fund special education to ensure the services for the students

We appreciate the Maryland General Assembly’s careful considerations of our comments and concerns. We look forward to working collaboratively with the committees to craft more reasonable and equitable solutions to address the sustainability of the Blueprint. At its core, this legislation undercuts the building block of the Blueprint by reducing promised Foundation funding through reduced state and local funding for the life of the Blueprint, and diverts resources to new initiatives at the State level that were never contemplated by the Kirwan Commission or discussed with local school systems.