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BILL: HB 772

TITLE: Education - Career Counseling Program for Middle and High School Students - Alterations

DATE: April 2, 2025

POSITION: Favorable with Amendments

COMMITTEE: Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four public school superintendents, **supports** House Bill 772 **with amendments**.

This bill extends the existing funding mechanism for the Career Counseling Program for Middle and High School Students for two years, through fiscal 2028. The bill likewise extends the program's reporting requirements by two years. The Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) must report to the Governor and the General Assembly on the effectiveness of the Career Counseling Program for Middle and High School Students, as specified, by January 1, 2027.

PSSAM appreciates this Committee's thoughtful consideration of our common-sense amendments that will improve this initiative before granting its extension through the 2027–2028 school year, and without an evaluation until January 2027.

First of all, the LEAs are very committed to career counseling and want to see the vision of individualized career plans for students honored and achieved.

When the 24 local superintendents undertook a comprehensive review of each pillar of the Blueprint last fall, the career counseling program stood out as a top priority in need of adjustment. ***This program represents a significant investment—\$55 million annually in new Blueprint funding—and yet is not universally serving students effectively across the state.*** Further, we would contend that in districts where it is working well, it is being managed directly by the school systems.

We strongly agree and believe that career counseling is a critical component of the Blueprint, and collaboration with Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) is important. However, the current structure—embedding the funding in the Foundation formula and mandating direct transfers to WIBs without checks or oversight—is poor policy and fiscally irresponsible.

In addition, the program was crafted without an analysis of existing career counseling programs within LEAs and pushed forward without a needs assessment to target effective implementation. Many career counseling programs existed in LEAs predating the Blueprint and already included robust offerings like CTE, apprenticeships, dual enrollment, early college, and more. There was also no consideration on capacity or expertise of local WIBs to implement this initiative and many have acknowledged they are ill-equipped to take this on alone.

Career preparation and readiness were not new ideas or concepts uncovered by the Kirwan Commission, but the Blueprint rightfully elevated the importance of this work. LEAs greatly appreciate the State's dedicated funding to leverage both historic local investments and to expand partnerships. However, these expansions must recognize local context and strengths, and honor the feedback from educators who have the professional experience to build the most effective programs for middle and high school students' developmental and academic abilities.

As it stands, in non-LEA-led districts, the career coaching program is siloed, bureaucratic, and inflexible. It operates as a top-down, box-checking exercise rather than a tool for real transformation. The return on investment is low, and with thoughtful course corrections, this funding could be a powerful driver of student success.

Importantly, the Blueprint holds **LEAs** accountable for ensuring students are college and career ready by 10th grade or by graduation—**not the WIBs**. Yet in many cases, LEAs have little to no role in overseeing this counseling work. This disconnect undermines our ability to meet Blueprint expectations. Counseling must be fully integrated into the broader efforts underway to prepare students for life after high school.

There is currently no accountability mechanism for the WIBs. LEAs must track Blueprint funds by month, school, and category—down to the student level. By contrast, WIBs are not held accountable to share budgets or provide documentation of services rendered. This is unacceptable for an entity tasked with providing a single service: career counseling.

Therefore, we respectfully request the following:

1. Delay the ratification of the FY 2026 MOU if requested by any party

If requested by one of the parties to the MOUs, a new FY 2026 MOU will not be ratified by the appropriate state agency until the following actions are completed, or by mutual consent and approval by the appropriate state agency:

- A **comprehensive review** of existing LEA and WIB programs;
- A **district-specific needs assessment**, including school-level needs as applicable;
- A **service delivery plan** outlining:
 - The entity that will hire and manage career coaches;

- Hiring timelines; and
- Service models appropriate for each grade band.
- A **provision** that would allow for the appropriate state agency to **enforce the terms of the MOU by withholding funding** to the noncompliant party.

2. Unified Training and Information Sharing

LEAs shall provide training for all career coaches—whether employed by LEAs or WIBs—to ensure they can clearly articulate each district’s college and career pathways, including academic, CTE, apprenticeship, internship, dual enrollment, early college, AP, IB, and other unique opportunities.

3. Fiscal Accountability for WIBs

WIBs must be held to the same standards of fiscal and programmatic accountability as LEAs. MOUs should require:

- **Annual budgets** aligned with the service delivery plan;
- **Quarterly expenditure reports** to LEAs;
- **Annual program reports** to the appropriate state agency.

4. Evaluation and Oversight

The legislation should require:

- An **interim evaluation report** to the Governor and General Assembly by **May 31, 2026**.
- A **final report and recommendations** by **December 15, 2026**
- Ideally, these evaluations should be conducted by an independent third party with no vested interest in the program.

We believe these recommendations strike a balance between accountability, collaboration, and student-centered design. We welcome continued partnership with the Committee and urge a **favorable report with amendments** to ensure this program is as effective, efficient, and equitable as it was intended to be.

Attachment: Original opposition testimony to HB 772



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BILL: HB 772

TITLE: Education - Career Counseling Program for Middle and High School
Students - Alterations

DATE: February 25, 2025

POSITION: Oppose

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents **opposes** House Bill 772.

This bill would extend, indefinitely, the Career Counseling pilot program between the workforce investment boards and county boards of education. Currently, local boards of education are required to provide funding to workforce development boards to support the Career Counseling Program for middle and high school students. Each county board shall distribute \$62 a student, for fiscal year 2024 and for fiscal year 2025, and each fiscal year thereafter, the prior fiscal year amount increased by the inflation adjustment. The local workforce development board along with the county board and any other relevant State or local agencies, shall report to the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) on the use and impact of the use of funds. The purpose of the program is to provide each middle school and high school student in the county with individualized career counseling services. This act shall take effect July 1, 2025.

PSSAM **strongly** opposes this bill due to several critical issues with the pilot program's implementation. The Blueprint appropriately identified the importance of Career Counseling as part of Pillar III and crafted the pilot program with local workforce investment boards and community colleges to create stronger ties to the business community. The statute reflects that this pilot expires in fiscal 2027, however, the implementation of this initiative has been problematic and inconsistent. Where it is working well, it is largely implemented by staff hired and trained by the districts. In December, 2024 one of our PSSAM's top legislative recommendations was to allow LEAs the immediate discretion to discontinue the pilot

partnerships with community colleges and workforce investment boards (WIBs) a year ahead of the pilot's expiration. House Bill 772 aims to do the exact opposite of our recommendations.

Career coaching is a valuable initiative that should become a permanent program. However, funding for this program should not be allocated to the Workforce Board. While it is essential to continue partnering with the local community college and Workforce Board, career coaches should be employed directly by the local school system.

The sections below reflect some of our issues with the current approach to the implementation of local workforce boards.

Lack of Support

Career coaches across local districts are disappointed with the insufficient support from workforce boards, particularly in connecting students with industry professionals, providing access to networking events, and offering professional development. Workforce boards have also fallen short in organizing school-based career fairs and interviews for students. As a result, much of the responsibility has fallen on LEA career coaches and Career and Technical Education (CTE) staff. For example, in one school district, career coaches have not received updates on local business trends, labor market data, or current hiring practices since their initial training in Summer/Fall 2023.

Additionally, and unexpectedly, professional development opportunities for career coaches have been outsourced to external partners. This was an area in which many school districts expected their workforce board to support career coaches and even some additional school system employees. Furthermore, many districts have found that local workforce development boards lack effective communication and collaboration, undermining their initial promises and intentions to support both career coaches and students.

Mismanagement of Funds

The current financial relationship with workforce boards has been proven problematic across many local school districts. First, many districts report that the funds allocated to their local workforce board are primarily supporting internal operations rather than benefiting students directly. In one district, the local WIB's budget detailed overhead costs of \$49,000 for building space, \$34,000 for other costs, and \$238,000 for salaries for office staff, amounting to 14% of the funds.

In another LEA, the local Workforce Board is unwilling to revisit the staffing structure model regarding the number of coaches per school. Currently, one coach has been assigned to each school, whether it has 75 students or 2,400. The local school system has asked to revisit this structure to better meet the needs of all students, but no changes have been made.

Initially, the local Workforce Board had only one administrative position; however, non-school-based positions have quadrupled over the past 18 months. These positions duplicate the roles already established within the local school system, resulting in financial mismanagement.

Issues with Staffing

Local school districts have identified various inefficiencies in staffing, including the failure to allocate necessary resources for agreed-upon services, inflexibility when it comes to the number of coach assignments per school and unfilled vacancies to the point where, in one school district, 55% of schools experienced vacancies at the start of the school year. Generally, there is a lack of communication during hiring and onboarding processes, leading to some schools being unaware of when a new coach is hired, released, or even reporting to work. Collaboration between the districts and their workforce boards is also insufficient.

The local Workforce Board subcontracts most professional development training to web-based platforms and outside organizations. This was an area where we expected the Workforce Board to support career coaches and some additional school system employees, but this has not occurred.

Failure to Deliver Meaningful Results and Accountability

Overall, local school districts have not seen meaningful and tangible results from the implementation of workforce development boards. This current structure has added very little value to local schools. Their overall lack of accountability has led to incomplete data sharing with the local school system making it even more difficult to assess the programs' success.

Unfortunately, these are just a few of the common problems we have heard directly from our school-based employees.

Local superintendents strongly believe that career coaching is an indispensable resource we provide for students across Maryland's middle and high schools. However, we believe that funding should not be allocated to workforce boards, and instead should be directed to hiring career coaches at the local level, who can ensure direct oversight, accountability, and alignment with student and school community needs.

Benefits of Career Coaches as School System Employees

- Stronger Student Connections: Coaches will better understand how to engage with students and integrate into the school community.
- Equitable Access: Ensuring all students receive career coaching, not leaving it to each coach's discretion.

- School-Specific Alignment: Each principal can hire a coach who best fits the unique needs of their school community, something the Workforce Board may not be equipped to determine.

Again, career coaching is a valuable initiative and the Blueprint statute wisely assigns funding for this initiative, but we should learn from the pilot - the successful and unsuccessful pilot experiences - and allow LEAs the discretion to continue these relationships or bring these important resources to more successful and well developed internal programs.

For these reasons, PSSAM **strongly opposes** House Bill 772 and kindly requests an **unfavorable** report.