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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 672
School Health and Wellness Personnel Assessment and
Maryland Council on Advancement of School-Based Health Centers**

Madam Chair and fellow members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee, thank you for this opportunity to present **House Bill 672 School Health and Wellness Personnel Assessment and Maryland Council on Advancement of School-Based Health Centers**.

Most of the Maryland's youth, between the ages of five and eighteen spend about 6 hours a day, 180 days a year in our public schools. The primary mission of the schools is to facilitate learning, but we all know that there are many factors that affect the capacity to learn at any given moment. Students learn best when they feel cared about and safe, have enough food to eat, get enough sleep, and are physically healthy, just to name a few of those factors. There is little that schools can do to address these kinds of issues; however, they can and do provide some services and programs that can mitigate some of them. This legislation seeks to provide information to school systems about the availability of those supportive services and how they might improve them for students.

This legislation builds on the work of the Commission to Study the Health Care Workforce Crisis. Established by HB 625/SB 440/HB 625 (Delegate Kelly/Senator Beidle). in 2022, the Commission undertook a two-year study to frame recommendations for Maryland's ongoing efforts to address healthcare professional shortages. One of the Commission's priority recommendations was the need for consistent and ongoing data collection:

Healthcare workforce data should be collected, analyzed, and managed within a state data center on a consistent basis. Healthcare workforce trends are fluid, a point that was reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. One-time collection efforts only provide a point-in-time snapshot of the current landscape and predicted need.

We know that health professional shortages are constant, and sometimes severe, in school health and wellness programs. These shortages have profound impact on the health and wellbeing of students in elementary and secondary schools across Maryland.

Maryland is undertaking several important initiatives, even in this fiscal climate, to improve access to school health and wellness services in schools.

- Legislation in 2023 and 2024 expanded the Janet Hoffman Loan Repayment Program to include school nurses and school-based behavioral health professionals, including school counselors and school social workers.
- The Maryland Medical Assistance Program has launched an initiative to expand Medicaid reimbursement for school-based health services. The first phase expands billing for school social workers and school psychologists. Future phases could include occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, physical therapists, school nurses, and dental hygienists; and
- The Blueprint has invested state and local resources into increasing access to primary, behavioral health, and dental services in schools. Programs include wrap-around services in community schools and grants awarded by the Consortium for Consolidated Community Supports for behavioral health services.

State agencies and community stakeholders are engaging in these initiatives despite having no consistent source of data for the number of school health and wellness practitioners in each school. Some data may be available at the local district level, but there is no source of statewide data. The last available data for school nurses is from 2018-2019.

This legislation addresses the data gap by requiring the Maryland Departments of Health and Education to work together to regularly assess the number of school health and wellness practitioners working on primary and secondary schools. The agencies would also gather regular feedback from stakeholder groups, including professional associations.

The sponsor amendment provides that the Department of Health's report be on the website. This will make the data easily accessible to local districts and policy analysts who engage in studying healthcare professional shortages.

Thank you for your consideration of this legislation, which would solidify our support for student learning—and thriving—by assuring we are addressing some of the health issues that affect them. I humbly request a favorable report.