



Testimony in Support of House Bill 583

Primary and Secondary Education - Virtual Schools - Alterations

House Ways and Means Committee

February 12, 2025

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

We submit this testimony on behalf of the Maryland Coalition for Virtual School Access in strong support of HB583, a bill that ensures access to public virtual schools for all Maryland students who need it, regardless of their district of residence. The urgency of this bill cannot be overstated. With the elimination or drastic reduction of existing virtual schools, thousands of Maryland families have been left scrambling for alternatives, often at great personal and financial cost. For most of them, virtual school is not just a preference but a necessity for their children's education, safety, and well-being.

The Need for Virtual Schools: Who It Serves

Virtual schools are not a niche solution—they are an essential educational lifeline for a diverse group of students and educators. Those who need or thrive in virtual schools include:

- **Students with medical conditions** who are immunocompromised or face significant chronic health risks in in-person settings.
- **Students with disabilities** for whom virtual education provides the least restrictive environment.
- **Neurodivergent learners** who greatly benefit from learning in a quiet and accommodating home setting.
- **Students who have experienced bullying or mental health challenges** that find in-person school to be traumatic and unsafe.
- **Children from military or civil service families** who benefit from continuity in their education despite relocations.
- **New parents and young caregivers** who require flexibility in their education to balance family responsibilities.
- **Teachers** in need of accommodation who cannot work inside a classroom due to personal or family circumstances.

Virtual schools serve our most vulnerable populations whose needs traditionally go unmet. In Maryland **they serve higher percentages of at-risk students compared to traditional in-person schools**. For example, when Montgomery County's virtual school was operating, its student population included a higher percentage of Black students, Hispanic students, and

low-income families (FARMS recipients) than the county average. Additionally, it enrolled twice the percentage of students with disabilities than the rest of the county schools.

Further, virtual schools also serve as the **least restrictive environment** for many special education students, reducing the need for expensive private placements and additional supports or services while increasing educational access and equity.

It's also the case that **early access to an education is crucial to a students long term academic and economic success**. This means that elementary students are some of the most negatively affected by lacking access to virtual schools. But most districts in Maryland only offer upper level access to virtual courses, with only a few districts offering elementary grades, and there are NO virtual schools that serve Kindergarten or 1st grade students. We strongly encourage that **districts must provide access to virtual schools that serve all grades, Kindergarten through 12th**.

With tightening budgets and equity rollbacks across the nation, these students will be pushed even further into the margins. For all the hardship to come for these at-risk children, the passage of **HB583 will guarantee them that they don't have to fear being denied an education** as well.

What Virtual Schools Provide & Why the Maryland Model Was Uniquely Beneficial

The Maryland Blend Virtual Program (BVP) model, aligned to MD Education Code §7-1401: Virtual Schools, is unique. Like any other public school the **BVP model fosters a full-range learning experience and community**, instead of relying on asynchronous courses with limited teacher and peer interaction. There are several key attributes of the BVP model that set it apart from other virtual school models and enable student success, including:

- **Fully synchronous teaching** with real-time instruction from certified educators.
- **Full curriculum** aligned with state standards.
- **A structured, full-time school day** that mirrors in-person learning to maintain engagement and consistency.
- **A sense of community** where students were a part of a real school community with administrative staff, extracurriculars, mascots, and more.

The **BVP model enables students to thrive academically and socially**. Performance data show that students who may have struggled in traditional settings found success in fully synchronous BVP virtual schools, with many achieving their highest grades and levels of engagement. This **performance by students is seen across every school grade band**, with some of the highest achievement levels occurring in the elementary grades.

Importantly, **these virtual schools function and serve communities** just like other public schools. But most Local School Systems (LSS) treated them merely as programs, allowing them to hastily eliminate these schools and leaving thousands of families scrambling at the last minute in search for alternatives. By ensuring that LSSs provide access to a virtual school, and not just a program, these families are provided the stability that they have for too long been denied.

The Devastating Effects of Losing Access to a Virtual School

The loss of access to comprehensive virtual schools has had profound consequences for thousands of Maryland families. Many have been **left without adequate educational solutions, often being displaced from the public school system entirely and reluctantly forced to homeschool or pay out of pocket for private schools**. Others have been **forced back into unsafe or ineffective learning environments**, jeopardizing their academic progress and well-being. Parents and students have shared heartbreaking accounts of their struggles through testimonies provided to local boards. Here are some examples:

- A parent of a special education student recounted that before virtual school, her son "was failing. He was not engaged, easily distracted, and hated school." But in a local virtual school "he is doing amazing! I've never seen him more engaged and more independent. He looks forward to going to school each day."
- A military family shared that their children attending in-person school "were heavily bullied physically, emotionally, and mentally. They couldn't concentrate. They would come home with bruises and broken clothing, in tears." But their local virtual school provided a safe learning environment where they "succeeded and met their annual goals."
- A parent whose child struggles with focus said that before virtual learning, "teachers complained that he got distracted easily," but in his virtual school, "he became more responsible in doing and completing his school work. His vocabulary grew, and his grades soared."
- Another parent explained that in virtual school her son was "learning to be resourceful, enthusiastic, and a confident student." and also that "bullying, harassment, and intimidation have not impacted his academic learning."
- One mother painfully recalled, "Today I spoke with my son about the closure of virtual school, and he began to cry instantly with worry and fear. He said he doesn't want to go back in person due to bullying. He remembers painful moments where he had his glasses broken and was called names. 'You have to help me, Mommy, please help me.'"

These stories illustrate the human cost of eliminating access to virtual schools. Each year without a comprehensive virtual option is another year that thousands of Maryland students fall further behind, struggle unnecessarily, or are pushed out of the public education system altogether.

What HB583 Does & Why It's Needed Now

HB583 ensures that students across Maryland have access to a high-quality local or regional virtual public school, regardless of where they live. Without this legislation:

- Thousands of students will continue to lack access to an appropriate and effective educational option.
- Families will continue to be forced to reluctantly homeschool, receive inadequate education from their local system, or pay out of pocket for predominantly out-of-state private virtual schools.

Students only get one shot at each grade. Every year that passes without access to comprehensive virtual schools is another year lost for students who need it most. We cannot

allow Maryland students to miss their shot at an equitable education any longer. The passage of HB583 is vital to stopping the learning loss and erosion of trust in the public education system.

Fiscal Considerations: Cost Savings and Efficiencies

Importantly, **requiring LSSs to provide access to virtual schools comes at no additional inherent cost to the state.** As with other public schools, **virtual schools can be funded by the per pupil allocation of the children that attend them.** It is mandated that school systems educate every child in their district and any increase in costs caused by this legislation are merely the cost of educating the students and fulfilling that mandate. Additionally, with each new student that a school system brings in, be it to attend a virtual in-person school, the LSS is provided additional allocation to educate that child. Further, it is inherently less expensive to educate a child in a virtual school than a traditional brick and mortar school, freeing up resources for other priorities such as special education or pre-K expansion.

Conclusion

HB583 is not just about providing an option—it is about ensuring **educational equity, access, and success for every Maryland student.** The elimination of virtual schools across the state has caused unnecessary hardship and trauma to countless families and has also placed an oftentimes insurmountable obstacle between thousands of students and an equitable education. **This bill ensures that no child in Maryland is denied the education they need** due to geography, disability, health, or personal circumstances.

We urge this committee to stand with Maryland families and **pass HB583 this session.** Our students **cannot afford to wait another year** for a solution.

Thank you for your time and consideration.