

Testimony in Support of HB 583: Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – Alterations

Maryland House Committee on Education

Monday, February 10, 2025

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 583, a bill that would ensure Maryland families have access to high-quality virtual schooling options, no matter where they live. I submit this testimony today as a parent, an educator, and friend of hundreds of parents who live in Maryland, to share the reality faced by thousands of Maryland students who are being left behind because they do not have access to an education that meets their needs.

For some students, a traditional classroom is simply not an option. These are children battling chronic illness, students with disabilities who thrive in a home learning environment, neurodivergent kids who need a space free from the overwhelming stimuli of a physical school, and children who have faced relentless bullying that made in-person learning unbearable. It includes students whose parents serve in the military or diplomatic corps, students who need flexibility due to caregiving responsibilities, and even educators' children who benefit from the structure of virtual schooling.

I have spoken with families who have been forced to make impossible choices - whether to withdraw from their local school system, take on the financial burden of private education, or attempt homeschooling with limited resources. Some have even considered leaving the state entirely. These families are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for access to public education that works for their children, the same way brick-and-mortar schools work for so many others.

Maryland's virtual school model is unique because it is designed to mirror in-person education: fully synchronous instruction, a comprehensive curriculum, classmates who form a learning community, and certified teachers who provide the same level of engagement and support as traditional schools. This is not screen time; this is school. And the data shows that for many students, it is the best option. In fact, virtual schooling has helped reduce the need for certain IEP accommodations because students are already in the least restrictive environment.

But without this bill, thousands of at-risk students will continue to be left without a viable educational option. Without HB 583, local systems can - and have - chosen to shut down these programs, displacing families and forcing them into inadequate solutions like home hospital teaching, which was never designed for long-term education.

This bill is not an unfunded mandate - it ensures that students who need virtual schooling have access to it under Maryland's existing Blueprint minimum school funding model. It costs less to educate students virtually than in person, and it can actually create cost efficiencies by reducing the need for certain in-school accommodations and transportation costs. Moreover, keeping

students in Maryland's public school system ensures that funding stays in-state, benefiting local communities and businesses.

Some may argue that virtual schooling is not equitable for students who lack internet access. But equity does not mean denying access to those who need virtual schooling simply because it is not an option for everyone. The students who require brick-and-mortar schools will still have them. HB 583 simply ensures that students who cannot attend in person are not forced out of public education altogether.

Many Maryland school systems have already demonstrated that sustainable virtual schools can work, including programs in Anne Arundel, Baltimore County, Harford, and Cecil County. This bill builds on the progress of SB 610 and recognizes the enduring need for virtual education statewide.

At its heart, HB 583 is about access. It is about ensuring that every child in Maryland - no matter their zip code, their health condition, or their personal circumstances - has a right to a public education. No student should be forced to choose between their well-being and their education. I urge you to support HB 583 and give Maryland families the educational options they desperately need.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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Constituent of Calvert County