



HOUSE WAYS and MEANS COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL 137: Public Schools - Children Charged With a Crime of Violence - Prohibition on In-Person Attendance (School Safety Act of 2025)

January 23, 2025

Position: Unfavorable

The Choice Program strongly opposes HB 137 which seeks to prohibit students **charged** with a crime of violence from attending public school in person. This bill is unnecessary, harmful, and violates fundamental principles of equity, justice, and federal law. It denies children due process, perpetuates racial disparities, and undermines protections under the rights of students with disabilities. We believe that every child deserves a classroom, not a screen.

The Choice Program has served Maryland youth who are systems-involved for more than 35 years. In FY 24, we provided case management to more than 568 young people in central Maryland. Choice serves as an alternative to the school-to-prison pipeline. Choice youth participate in mentoring programs: a diversion program with the Department of Juvenile Services and/or our workforce development program including supported employment at one of our three social enterprises: University of Baltimore School of Law, Camden Yards, and in the Inner Harbor. Last year, Choice youth and their mentors completed **1,907** hours of community service.

We are funded by the State of Maryland, among others, to ensure that children enrolled in our programs stay connected to formal education. As direct service providers, one of our key performance measures is to keep students in school. This bill does the exact opposite. In our experience, virtual school may work for a few families when they choose it and if it is high quality. A blanket ban would lead to greater chances of failure, lower graduation rates, lower lifetime wages, and greater chances of involvement in the criminal legal system.

Our primary goal is to reduce the number of Black and Latine young people who are ensnared in the youth legal system. Our model seeks to dismantle racist structures and employs

strengths-based approaches focused on positive relationships and youth agency. We hold high expectations for youth and parents, and we offer high levels of support.

HB 137–HB68–will contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. As our colleagues at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender have noted, this bill will:

- Violate due process and presumption of innocence
- Is unnecessary and in conflict with current law
- Negatively impact students and will worsen educational gaps
- Make communities less safe
- Violate federal laws protecting students with disabilities
- Disproportionately impact Black students
- Create economic strain on families
- Jeopardize investigations
- Place a burden on law enforcement and schools

HB 137 is deeply flawed. We call upon our elected officials to recognize that the youth who are demonized in our current public discourse are humans who deserve supportive services. We maintain that community repair and wellbeing depends on a vision of community safety that rejects the impulse to punish based on **being charged with a crime**. Rather than isolating and criminalizing students, Maryland must focus on evidence-based, equitable approaches to school safety that support all learners.

For these reasons, Choice strongly opposes HB 137.

For more information, please contact:

Kelly Quinn, Ph.D. Managing Director kquinn@umbc.edu