

BILL: Senate Bill 770
TITLE: Public Schools and Youth Services – Crisis Support and Assistance and Workgroup Study
HEARING DATE: March 26, 2025
POSITION: Favorable with Amendments
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland, and the Maryland State Education Association **support Senate Bill 770 – Public School and Youth Services – Crisis Support and Assistance and Workgroup Study with several amendments.**

Our organizations recognize and appreciate the intent of this bill. Students and families navigating trauma deserve compassionate support, timely resources, and clear, responsive communication. We believe that effective crisis response, including communication, is essential to fostering safe, supportive learning environments. To that end, we recognize and support the goals underlying this bill:

1. Ensure crisis support is deployed in all instances and for all individuals where and when it is needed (and only in those instances); and
2. Ensure that students, families, and caregivers are supported, informed, and connected to relevant resources after traumatic events.

As amended, SB 770 raises several concerns that portend overreach and could unintentionally *cause* harm, *inflict* trauma, and *damage* trusted relationships in school communities—the opposite of our shared goals. Indeed, providing crisis support to individuals who do not display signs of trauma can actually cause trauma; and, information flooding, as opposed to deliberate, measured communication risks unnecessary alarm and distress among students and families.

We believe the goals of SB 770 could be fully achieved—in a clearer, more efficient manner—by making small but meaningful additions to the existing *Maryland Safe to Learn Act* (Md. Code Ann. Educ. Art. § 7-1501 et. seq.). Many of the provisions in SB 770 overlap significantly with the Maryland Safe to Learn Act.

1. **Ensure crisis support is deployed in all instances and for all individuals where and when it is needed by expanding the definition of “School Emergency Plan” in the Safe to Learn Act.**

While well-intentioned, the current automatic triggers for crisis response in SB 770 do not align with best practices in trauma-informed care. **Therefore, we suggest the bill be amended to remove any reference to staff removal as an automatic trigger for crisis support deployment.** SB 770 currently provides the following:

“A local school system shall provide crisis support and assistance to a public school in the county when a teacher or other school employee with direct contact with minors is removed from the classroom or school building due to alleged criminal activity or for student safety.”

We are concerned that this language may unintentionally cause harm. To be sure, some staff removals are crises, but most are not. Crisis intervention deployment can have as much a negative impact on students as failure to intervene when support is needed. According to both the National Institutes of Health and the National Association of School Psychologists, trauma-informed care must be tailored; standardized, blanket crisis intervention can create trauma or retraumatize individuals. Both NASP and NIH emphasize that crisis responses should be proportionate and individualized to avoid the risk of secondary trauma.

Instead, Expand the Definition of “School Emergency Plan” in the Safe to Learn Act.

The Safe to Learn Act currently defines a school emergency plan as:

a plan for each local school system and each public school within the school system that addresses mitigation of, preparedness for, response to, and recovery from emergencies, including

- (1) Violent or traumatic events on school grounds during regular school hours or during school-sponsored activities; and
- (2) events in the community that affect school operations.

Md. Code Ann. Educ. Art. § 7-1501(i).

We suggest adding a third element to this definition to encompass all crises and align to the National Association of School Psychologists' definition of a crisis:

(3) An event or series of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and its students, staff, or community, that threaten the physical or psychological safety of individuals or the overall functioning of the school.

This language will require emergency plans to encompass not just behavioral or physical threats under the Safe to Learn Act, but also those events that cause emotional trauma for students. This would encompass staff removals that rise to the level of a crisis, but not categorically require crisis intervention for any staff removal as SB 770 does currently.

2. By expanding the communications required to be part of a school emergency plan in the Safe to Learn Act, we can ensure that students, families, and caregivers are supported, informed, and connected to relevant resources after traumatic events.

The Safe To Learn Act already contemplates communications to be deployed as part of emergency plans. The current law states:

On or before August 1, 2020, and regularly thereafter, each local school system shall update the school emergency plan for each public school in the school system's jurisdiction to

- (1) Include detailed plans for the manner in which each public school will address:
 - (i) Behavioral threats;
 - (ii) Emergency events; and
 - (iii) Accommodations for students with disabilities in emergency events.

Md. Code. Ann. Educ. Art. § 7-1510(d).

To achieve the broader and more robust communication goals of SB 770, we propose the following additions to this section:

On or before August 1, 2020, and regularly thereafter, each local school system shall update the school emergency plan for each public school in the school system's jurisdiction to

- (1) Include detailed plans, **including communication plans**, for the manner in which each public school will address:
 - (i) Behavioral threats;

- (ii) Emergency events; **and**
- (iii) Accommodations for students with disabilities in emergency events; **and**
- (iv) **Other crises, as identified by the school system, that may significantly impact student or school physical safety, emotional safety, or community trust.**

MABE, PSSAM and MSEA support the intent behind SB 770 and welcome continued dialogue on how best to support students and families during times of crisis. We believe the most effective and efficient way to realize the bill's goals is to expand and refine the existing Maryland Safe to Learn Act. We encourage lawmakers to consider these amendments to the Safe to Learn Act and would be pleased to work with you to draft language that achieves these goals.

Therefore, we request a **favorable with amendments** report on SB 770.