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BILL: HB 1180

TITLE: Education - Primary and Secondary Schools - Alternative School Options (Right to Learn Act)

DATE: March 3, 2025

POSITION: Unfavorable

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four public school superintendents, **opposes** House Bill 1180.

This bill requires each county board of education to provide certain information to the parents or legal guardians of students who attend a failing school; requiring that a failing school continue to be designated as a failing school until certain conditions are met; requiring that a student who is attending a failing school be provided the opportunity to attend an alternative school; establishing the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Program to provide certain scholarships for certain students; requiring each county board to provide a list of available military boarding schools options to the parents or legal guardian to notify the county board of a student's decision to continue attending the school or to attend an alternative school or military boarding school; requiring the local school system of a certain student to pay for the student to attend a certain military boarding school; and generally relating to alternative school options. This act shall take effect July 1, 2025.

PSSAM opposes this bill for several reasons. First, the BOOST program, created in 2016, established a \$5 million annual appropriation to provide vouchers for students who are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program to attend eligible nonpublic schools. PSSAM, along with our partners in education advocacy such as the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) and the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA), has consistently opposed legislation to further codify the establishment of the BOOST program.

Second, PSSAM does not believe that this legislation is needed to promote parental choice among the public and non-public schools in the State. Maryland enjoys a wide array of educational opportunities for all students, including a consistently high-performing public education system, and within several school systems, charter schools continue to grow at a rapid pace.

Unlike nonpublic and private schools, except for nonpublic special education schools, Maryland public schools are held strictly accountable by local, state, and federal laws and regulations, such as those related to teacher education and certification, academic standards, and anti-discrimination laws. Local superintendents fully recognize that strong accountability measures for Maryland's 900,000 public school students translates into strong accountability for public dollars invested in education. In addition, it is important to note that public schools provide effective educational programs for all students, including special education, Multilingual Learners, early childhood, and rigorous high school programs that are not always available in parochial and private schools.

PSSAM strongly emphasizes our concern in allocating public dollars to support nonpublic programs that are not regulated under the same standards as public programs. We strongly urge the committee to consider the serious economic, constitutional, legal, and public policy consequences of the existing BOOST program, as well as any proposals to increase public funds for its operations as outlined in this legislation. PSSAM strongly opposes the establishment of a permanent funding stream that would ultimately finance private schools. The financial needs of our public school students must take priority over those who choose a private or parochial education.

For these reasons, PSSAM **opposes** House Bill 1180 and requests an **unfavorable committee report**.