

TO: House Committee on Ways and Means

BILL: House Bill (HB) 879 – Task Force to Improve Attendance and Reduce Chronic Absenteeism in Schools

DATE: February 25, 2025

POSITION: Support

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) supports passing **House Bill (HB) 879 – Task Force to Improve Attendance and Reduce Chronic Absenteeism in Schools**.

HB 879 Summary

HB 879 establishes a Task Force to address chronic absenteeism in schools. The proposed Task Force will consist of various stakeholders, including school officials, teachers, parents, and community representatives. The Task Force will research effective strategies, develop a statewide goal for reduction, and create resources for schools. The bill mandates that MSDE update attendance regulations based on the Task Force's findings.

MSDE Support

Given the efforts currently underway within MSDE, HB 879 would further efforts to improve attendance and address chronic absenteeism.

In September 2024, the State Superintendent established a Task Force to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absences in schools. The Task Force is made up of professionals representing various sectors within education, mental health, and community services. This diverse team brings a wealth of perspectives and expertise with a multifaceted approach to tackling chronic absences and improving student outcomes. The Task Force's charge is to identify and share successful strategies for reducing chronic absences, create a comprehensive attendance guidance document that will provide actionable strategies for schools at all levels, and offer resources for both students and schools from early intervention to intensive supports, to address the root causes of absences.

In its membership, the Task Force has a representative of the Baltimore Teachers Union, the Maryland State Education Association, a representative from Parent's Place of Maryland, a behavioral health coordinator, community school coordinator, director of student services, school counselor, pupil personnel worker, a Free State parent representative, a representative of higher education, an LEA Assistant Superintendent for Student Services, two local superintendents, elementary and secondary school principals, and MSDE staff.

The Task Force is partnering with Attendance Works to develop statewide attendance guidance, develop a toolkit with resources for LEAs, implement an attendance communication plan, institute a community of practice, and facilitate collaboration opportunities with other states.

In addition to activities related to the Task Force and its partnership with Attendance Works, MSDE has been engaged in providing chronic absences support to improve student outcomes through:

- researching trends in statewide and local data on attendance and school climate;
- reviewing school data to identify schools that have lowered chronic absences and improved attendance and determining strategies that have contributed to their success;
- identifying and addressing how school climate may impact attendance (example: impact of bullying behaviors, what contributes to school avoidance);
- utilizing the Maryland School Mental Health Response Team to provide support to school counselors and student services personnel to address challenges with attendance; and
- identifying strategies that community schools are using to reduce chronic absences.

Through these comprehensive efforts, the Task Force and MSDE, in partnership with Attendance Works, aim to create a supportive and effective framework for improving student attendance across Maryland.

The Task Force required by HB 879 can build on this work, through creation of guidelines and a toolkit that will be used by LEAs. LEAs will adopt new guidelines and practices for tracking attendance, implementing new strategies to address chronic absenteeism, and potentially updating their systems for data collection and reporting. In addition to the stakeholders already involved in this work, HB 879 adds a representative of the Senate of Maryland, a member of the House of Delegates, and a representative of the Governor's Office.

MSDE respectfully requests consideration of these comments as HB 879 is discussed and deliberated.

For further information, please contact Dr. Akilah Alleyne (Executive Director of Government Affairs) at 410-767-0504, or Akilah.alleyne@maryland.gov