

SUPPORT: Senate Bill 289
Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program
Personnel and Per Pupil Grants - Eligible Uses
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
February 3, 2026

My name is Kristen Wong Callisto, Ed.L.D., CEFL, Story Tapestries board vice-chair and I am writing **in strong support of Senate Bill 289** , Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - Personnel and Per Pupil Grants - Eligible Uses.

My career began as a special education teacher in a high-poverty neighborhood on Oahu, eventually spanning every level from preschool to graduate school across five states. I've also led system-wide policy as the Director of School Improvement for Washington State. These twenty years in K-12 education have taught me one vital truth: a 21st -century education must be well -rounded, rigorous, and relevant to succeed in holding the proper market share on engagement of today's students against the competition from education disrupters like YouTube, TikTok, and AI.

The arts are not a luxury; they are an essential instructional tool because they integrate core instructional content by authorizing a learner to personalize and create meaning through creativity. Furthermore, as schools grapple with declining attendance and increased mental health needs, a student may not be engaged by a math lesson, but may want to come to school for their fine arts class where they will nevertheless still learn principles of math like geometry. A student may not be able to articulate their feelings to even the school counselor but perhaps they can express it through connecting with a character in their drama class or feel a sense of belonging just the camaraderie of standing shoulder to shoulder with their peers in their choir.

Yet, the arts remain a primary site of inequity in education. When districts are in greater resource constraints than usual, arts are among the first instructional areas to be treated as "elective" and budgets are reduced or cut. What many schools fail to realize is that cutting arts education most impacts students in under -resourced communities who lack the private means to fill that gap. It is precisely these communities that need it the most:

As one of our partners shared with us : "The impact of Story Tapestries on our students and families was like introducing water to a desert - growth and blooming happened in beautiful and necessary ways." (Lynn Rose, Community Engagement Manager, Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless)

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future admirably intends to transform Maryland 's public education system into a world -class system. To help us get there, we must be diligent to ensure that all **critical and core content areas** , including the arts, are upheld and **supported through this transformation** . Particularly for schools that serve concentrations of students experiencing poverty, communities should have the opportunity to invest supportive funding into strategies they know to be best for their students. HB352/SB289 furthers the goals of the

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Blueprint in delivering this world class education by ensuring **uninterrupted allowable usage of funds** established at the outset of the Blueprint's implementation.

Currently, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future states that **concentration of poverty funds from the personnel and per pupil grant** may be used through fiscal year 2027 to provide the programs required under COMAR 13A.04 ([2022, HB1450, §5 -223\(c\)\(9\), Pg. 3](#), repeated in [2025, HB504§5 -223\(c\)\(9\)](#), Pg. 16). These programs form the core subject areas of a public school students' education: everything from science, mathematics, and fine arts to English language arts, social studies, and physical education.

After fiscal year 2027, the eligibility of this use of the concentration of poverty funds from the personnel and per pupil grant will expire. HB352/SB289 seeks to **eliminate the sunset timeline** in the law to ensure that arts education, among other subject areas, continues to be an allowable use of funding in perpetuity to support the world -class education every student deserves.

Having implemented education policy across multiple states, I know that success depends on clarity and specificity that often surprises stakeholders. Without specific mandates, the original intent of a policy can easily be lost between the statehouse and the classroom or in more unfortunate situations be seen as permission to stop or reduce commitment by those looking for the easiest path to compliance and execution. This bill provides the vital direction that school boards and district leaders need to ensure arts education remains a permanent, protected priority for every student.

Arts education is critical and transformative for our students . The arts offer unique ways to connect and engage with the world around us, which often leads to a strengthened sense of belonging. The arts support social -emotional skill development that helps children thrive in all aspects of their lives. Learning an arts discipline **boosts neuroplasticity, producing long - lasting impacts on the brain** . The arts are also essential for college and career readiness, strengthening student's problem solving and critical thinking skills applicable to any path, including a collegiate or professional pathway in the arts.

Sunsetting this allowable use of funding would make it very difficult to continue supporting arts education at the levels that are currently provided. To continue the investment in our children that we know is needed and possible, we believe that school communities should **continue having the option** to invest their CPG funding in the arts in response to community need.

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With the passage of HB352/SB289, Maryland can maintain the Blueprint's foundation of a well-rounded education so that we can enhance it even further. Therefore, I urge the committee to provide a **favorable report on SB 289**. Thank you for investing in the future of our state: Maryland's public school students.

Sincerely,

Kristen Wong Callisto, Ed.L.D. CEFL
Story Tapestries Board Vice-Chair