SWASC Social Work Advocates for Social Change

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS OF BILL SB 70

Adult Education – High School Diploma Pathways – GED Option Pilot Program and MDiplomaWorks Pathway

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

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Social Work Advocates for Social Change supports SB 70 with amendments that will create a temporary GED Option Pilot Program to allow at-risk students to earn a high school diploma by examination and establish the permanent MDiplomaWorks pathway, which allows eligible adults to earn a diploma by demonstrating academic and career competencies instead of completing traditional coursework.

Maryland's high school graduation rate stands at 85.8 percent, roughly in line with the national average. However, this overall figure masks deep and persistent disparities in diploma attainment. Graduation rates for Hispanic/Latino students (71.4 percent), English language learners (55.8 percent), students with disabilities (69.5 percent), and economically disadvantaged students (80.8 percent) fall well below the state average. These inequities are even more pronounced in Baltimore City, where only 70.6 percent of students graduate—the lowest rate in the state[i]. These data make clear that **many Maryland students need additional support and meaningful solutions to complete their education.**

Student retention and graduation are complex challenges that require multiple, carefully designed interventions. One frequently cited reason students leave school before earning a diploma is the need to support family members, including their own minor children. In that context, a state-sanctioned program that allows students to work while continuing their education is a promising and welcome concept. Many of these students are not disengaged from learning; rather, they are struggling to balance school with financial responsibilities.

Maryland's child labor laws are appropriately strict, but as a result, students under 18 often cannot earn meaningful, family-supporting wages through lawful employment. When students do find work that ignores these protections, those jobs frequently fail to accommodate school schedules or educational needs. Once a student turns 18, employers may legally disregard school attendance altogether, even if the student remains enrolled. **A legitimate "earn and learn" pathway could address this gap by ensuring that employment is lawful, supportive of education, and genuinely connected to long-term career and wage growth rather than short-term, low-quality labor.**

However, **as written, Senate Bill 70 raises serious civil rights concerns.** Although the bill is framed as expanding options, history shows that alternative diploma pathways, when not tightly safeguarded, often operate as mechanisms of exclusion rather than opportunity. SB 70 allows students as young as 17 to be identified as "at significant risk" and diverted from traditional high school into GED-based or workforce-focused pathways. In practice, students labeled "at risk" are disproportionately students with disabilities, students of color, English learners, low-income students, and youth involved in foster care or the juvenile justice system. **Without explicit protections, the bill risks creating a two-tier education system that is neither equitable nor legally defensible.**

Civil rights law is clear on this point. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states may not use alternative pathways to push out struggling students or to obscure subgroup underperformance. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, policies that predictably result in racial or linguistic disparities are unlawful, even absent discriminatory intent.

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Yet SB 70 does not require informed and voluntary consent from students and families; does not guarantee that required academic, language, or special education services are fully provided before alternative placement; does not establish bias-resistant criteria for identifying students; and does not guarantee a student's right to return to a traditional high school pathway. **These omissions create a substantial risk of systemic civil rights violations.**

Additional concerns arise with the MDiplomaWorks pathway. Workforce-based credentials and work-based learning opportunities, without guaranteed paid placements, transportation, and equitable access to employers, are likely to advantage students with greater social and economic capital while reinforcing existing labor-market segregation. Without strong safeguards, these pathways may channel marginalized students into limited futures rather than expanding opportunity.

Finally, SB 70 measures success primarily by completion rather than outcomes. Civil-rights compliance requires more than tracking whether students exit the system; it requires assessing whether students gain access to postsecondary education, family-sustaining wages, and long-term economic mobility. **Outcome data must be tracked over time and disaggregated by race, disability status, language proficiency, and income.**

We urge the committee to amend SB 70 to require informed and voluntary participation; prohibit the replacement of legally required educational supports; establish transparent and equitable selection criteria; guarantee the right to re-enter traditional high school; ensure diploma rigor and parity; provide comprehensive and equitable supports for work-based learning; and mandate long-term, disaggregated outcome reporting.

Alternative pathways must not become civil-rights shortcuts. Equity demands that flexibility expand opportunity—not lower expectations or narrow futures.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable with amendments report on SB 70.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

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[i] Maryland State Department of Education, 2024. https://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/2024/0326/Graduation-Rate-Information-A.pdf