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January 28, 2026

SB 208 - UNF

Higher Education - Religious Educational Institutions - Certificate of Approval

Dear Chair Brian J. Feldman, Vice-Chair Cheryl C. Kagan, and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

This bill exempting some religious schools from the regulations for obtaining a certificate of approval, and for requesting an exemption, is entirely counter-productive and should be rejected in committee. The existing regulations describing the academic standards that private schools are required to meet to obtain a certificate of approval [COMAR 13A.09.09] are minimal and lacking in rigor. The non-academic safety requirements are equally basic and necessary. Yet the existing regulations, employing inappropriately sectarian language, allow a “bona fide church organization that chooses to operate a school” to submit a “church exempt registration form”. Any such exemption procedure granted to religious private schools should also be available to non-religious private schools. If lawmakers are unwilling to allow this same exemption to non-religious private schools, as is likely, then they should also be unwilling to grant this exemption exclusively to religious schools. Free exercise should apply equally to religious and non-religious citizens and institutions within the same practical limitations. Accordingly, a certificate of approval should be required for all private schools, secular and religious, that claim to provide an education in lieu of a public school education without exceptions. If some provisions in the regulations are sometimes too onerous then opt-out procedures that apply to all private schools should target those specific provisions.

Secular Maryland advocates for all youth to be educated in modern knowledge without omissions or qualifications. We consider this goal to be one of the top priorities of state government. Our collective knowledge is rooted in an international consensus of subject matter experts that is logically derived using an overall best fit with the available empirical evidence criteria. Finding empirical evidence and convincingly relating the evidence to relevant conclusions requires effort and time. The history of the pursuit of knowledge demonstrates that this epistemology is uniquely successful, there is no

other approach that reliably reaches accurate conclusions about how our universe functions. Beliefs about how the universe functions that are derived outside the aforementioned framework are not knowledge. Teaching such beliefs to children as if they are knowledge is miseducation.

There are few restrictions on what private schools can teach their students, so they may mix academics, religion, and politics tightly together. Religious schools often have an institutional self-interest to try to convince children to accept the school's dubious definition of deity. Young children are impressionable, teenagers are responsive to peer pressure, and as a result they are vulnerable to indoctrination. They may be taught that faith is one of the most important virtues, that one faith is superior to all other faiths, that they will be severely punished for disbelieving and greatly rewarded for believing, that particular beliefs about how the universe functions are requisite for morality, that competing perspectives, including the perspectives from secular academics, oppose the will of divinity and will provoke the divinity's earth shaking wrath. They may actively teach children to distrust and fear competing perspectives, including secular academics. Some schools teach children blatant falsehoods that contradict modern scientific consensus. The result is potentially harmful miseducation that undermines the targeted victim's intellectual potential and can be difficult to undo

Even those religiously affiliated private schools that are the most ecumenical, that eschew holy book inerrancy, that seek to embrace modern knowledge, gratuitously add some unsubstantiated religious content and avoid some scientific details when teaching children how the universe functions to promote their religious worldview, resulting in a subtly biased and compromised education. Schools that do not promote young or old earth creationism or intelligent design may instead promote theistic evolution. These schools may teach students that satan intervenes in our universe and associate satan with non-theism. They may misleadingly teach about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, virgin birth, resurrection, etc. as if they were historical facts. A commitment to know the facts regarding how the universe functions and to understand how to reliably distinguish between well-justified and poorly justified assertions are valuable civic virtues that government should be fostering, not undermining by abandoning its oversight role.

Unregulated private school education is unlikely to provide better educational outcomes for Maryland's children overall. At a Congressional House Education and Workforce Committee hearing on February 3, 2016 titled "Expanding Educational Opportunity

through School Choice," Luis Huerta, Associate Professor of Education & Public Policy at Columbia University, stated that none of the independent studies of the nation's "most lauded and long-standing voucher programs...found any statistical evidence that children who utilized vouchers performed better than children who did not and remained in public schools." However, Huerta said there is "evidence to support that[,] compared against students who participate in voucher programs, public school students fare better academically." GAO researchers examined voucher and tax credit programs nationwide but concentrated on the major ones in Arizona, Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin. The GAO reported on Sept. 12, 2016 that such programs "have weaker standards for teacher preparedness than public schools" and "cherry-pick student applicants ... often discriminating against some students based on their religion or disability-related behaviors".

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Respectfully,
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