



HB1278- Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission & Fund
Hearing before the Ways & Means Committee, March 11, 2026
Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Gianna Rodriguez, and I am the Executive Director and Founder of Baltimore Youth Arts, a community-based nonprofit arts education organization serving youth ages 14 to 24 in Baltimore City. I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB1278.

HB1278 establishes the Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission and a dedicated, nonlapsing Positive Youth Development Fund within MSDE to support community-based programming for youth from birth to 25.

The bill reflects what public health and education leaders increasingly recognize: excessive and unregulated social media use is associated with increased risks to youth mental health, including anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and social isolation. At the same time, Maryland lacks a dedicated, sustainable funding mechanism for prevention through youth development programming outside school hours.

Research consistently shows that protective factors -- consistent adult relationships, structured time, skill-building, and opportunities for belonging -- reduce risk behaviors and strengthen resilience. Afterschool programs, summer learning, mentoring, and community-based initiatives provide exactly these conditions.

Maryland continues to rank in the bottom tier nationally for afterschool access, despite strong parent demand. Without safe, supervised environments, many youth default to screens as childcare.

At Baltimore Youth Arts, our Studio Apprentice Program serves justice-involved youth and young people who have been disconnected from traditional school and employment pathways in Baltimore City. Participants are paid for their time as they develop visual arts skills, entrepreneurship knowledge, and the social-emotional competencies that help them build toward stable futures -- all within a consistent community of caring adults. The young people we work with show us every day what becomes possible when youth have access to structured, meaningful programming outside of school hours.

HB1278 is a smart prevention strategy. It links potential social media litigation revenue to long-term youth well-being, ensures funds are supplemental, and prioritizes meaningful youth engagement in program design.

As the leader of a positive youth development organization, I strongly support policies that invest upstream in prevention rather than downstream in crisis response. HB1278 does precisely that.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Gianna Rodriguez
Gianna Rodriguez

Executive Director and Founder, Baltimore Youth Arts

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