

**Education Reform Advocates, LLC**

**HB1278- Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission & Fund**

**Hearing before the Ways & Means Committee, March 11, 2026**

**Position: Favorable**

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

My name is Paul Smith, and I am an educator with 30 years of experience and currently an evaluator of youth programming in 7 of Maryland's 24 districts, while residing in Baltimore County. 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 birth–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.

I have seen how programs support the holistic development of young people, both as a practitioner and as an evaluator. From the 2024-25 school year, the data confirmed that students generally felt more confident, regularly connected with caring adults, and did better in school at Jonathan Hager Elementary School in Hagerstown. In fact, “75% of students felt ‘really confident or confident’ when asked about doing their school work since they had had tutoring.” And further, “100% of parents surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed that Jonathan Hager's after-school program is of high quality.”

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 an education advocate, 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,

Paul Smith

Principal, Education Reform Advocates, LLC

