

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

House Bill 479

Southern Maryland Early College Teacher Pathway Program and Program Workgroup – Establishment

February 11, 2026

Favorable

Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, members of the committee, thank you for this chance to testify on House Bill 479, establishing the Southern Maryland Early College Teacher Pathway Program.

The bill directs the Maryland State Department of Education, in consultation with the Maryland Higher Education Commission, to administer and implement the program. It also requires the University System of Maryland (USM) to work with both agencies to develop the program and the corresponding teacher preparation pathway, and establishes the Southern Maryland Early College Teacher Pathway Program Workgroup to guide and coordinate this effort.

This bill is not about creating another standalone program. It's about deploying the full strength of Maryland's K12 schools, community colleges, and public four-year universities as they work *together* to prepare Maryland's next generation of educators.

Maryland faces a persistent teacher shortage, particularly in rural regions like Southern Maryland. District leaders in Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's counties report ongoing vacancies in core subject areas and difficulty finding educators who reflect and understand the communities they serve.

At the same time, many talented students in these regions face financial and structural barriers to accessing teacher preparation programs. Compounding this challenge, Southern Maryland has few four-year colleges, contributing to a significant workforce drain: Students often leave the region to pursue a teaching degree, but don't return home to teach.

The USM at Southern Maryland, one of the System's three regional higher education centers, is a critical asset in addressing this challenge by bringing the full breadth of USM universities and programs directly to the region. This model is already supporting a limited number of early childhood education pathways. With a more coordinated approach, these efforts can be expanded to meet pressing needs in the secondary education, special education, and ESOL teaching workforce.

Under this bill, high school students will be supported from the start with a clear understanding of how each course fits into a broader credential or degree pathway. For low-income, first-generation, and rural students, this structure is especially critical. It reduces the risk of excess credits, shortens time to degree, lowers college

costs, and increases the likelihood that students persist into and through a bachelor's degree program. In doing so, the bill diversifies and strengthens the teacher pipeline in direct alignment with the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, while promoting regional stability by cultivating educators who have deep roots in their communities and are committed to living, working, and serving there long term.

As a public university system, it's our responsibility to ensure that cost, distance, and complexity are not barriers to opportunity, and certainly not for students who feel called to serve. HB479 holds us to that foundational responsibility.

This bill is designed not only to serve Southern Maryland, but to establish a scalable model for regional implementation statewide. An investment in HB479 enables intentional coordination across K12 systems, community colleges, and four-year universities to build a thoughtful, end-to-end teacher preparation pathway that leverages existing state resources and aligns with Maryland's priorities to expand apprenticeships, meet workforce needs, and address the state's critical teacher shortage.

This targeted investment allows the state to build, evaluate, and refine a model that can be replicated in other regions facing similar challenges and expanded over time through Blueprint funding. HB479 affirms that affordability matters, that early exposure matters, and that intentionally designed pathways can transform individual lives while advancing the public good.

The University System of Maryland strongly supports House Bill 479 and urges a Favorable Report.