



CODE IN THE SCHOOLS

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:

Code in the Schools is a Baltimore-based nonprofit whose mission is to empower youth to thrive in the 21st century economy by expanding access to high-quality computer science education. Each year, we provide more than 2,000 young people with foundational through advanced technical skills in both in- and out-of-school-time settings. We work at the intersection of technology and young people every day, and it is precisely because of that work that we write today in strong support of House Bill 1278 and the establishment of the Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission and Fund.

As social media use becomes ubiquitous amongst American teenagers, HB1278 aims to mitigate the potential harms of our increasingly digital world with a proven solution: structured, relationship-based programming for young people. While much of the narrative about solutions to these issues addresses the design of platforms themselves, this bill aims to mitigate the harms caused by young people navigating social media alone, without trusted adults and structured relationships to help them process their digital experiences. Research on adolescent development consistently finds that online behaviors mirror offline social strengths and vulnerabilities. Youth who have strong in-person relationships, structured activities, and caring mentors are better positioned to experience social media's benefits while managing its risks. The inverse is also true: social isolation offline amplifies the harms of negative online experiences.

For the 94% of teens ages 13-17 that use one or more social media platforms in the United States, where are they receiving the supportive, in-person experiences with safe adults that build positive digital lives? Many parents lack the knowledge or tools to effectively support their youth in navigating social media, and schools cannot carry this burden alone. Community based programming is uniquely positioned to support this gap, but Maryland consistently ranks among the bottom 10 states for after-school access. Parents of more than 567,000 children and youth in Maryland report wanting their child in an afterschool program, and approximately three in four of those children are not able to participate. Establishing the Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission and Fund would work directly to fill this gap by supporting the programs in our communities that are already working to provide holistic, positive experiences that better young people's lives. The American Academy of Pediatrics, in its recent policy statement on children and digital ecosystems, puts investment in these "third spaces" first among its recommendations, noting that in-person community environments can effectively crowd out digital overuse. The American Psychological Association's health advisory on adolescent social media use similarly finds that risk is lower when social media supplements offline connections rather than replacing them. HB1278 is an investment in exactly that offline connection.

What We See at Code in the Schools

At Code in the Schools, we witness both the promise and the peril of digital life every day, and we see clearly what makes the difference for the young people we serve.

Our curriculum integrates technical skill-building with the ethical use of technology, encouraging students to engage with their digital worlds more critically than they typically do in school or at home. When students debate the ethics of AI in creative fields, or when instructors and students work through the nuances of ethical hacking together, what we observe are young people who feel safe enough to explore hard questions and engage critically with technology. This is a skill needed more now than ever as AI complicates all aspects of life in the digital age.

This is the irreplaceable power of community-based programming. The space to go beyond the curriculum—to help a teenager process a hurtful comment they received online, to redirect a student who has fallen into an internet rabbit hole of harmful content, to celebrate the pride a young person feels when they build something and share it with the world—cannot be replicated by an algorithm or a content filter. It requires a human relationship.

Technology will only grow more central to the lives of young people. Our goal must not be to shield youth from that reality, but to ensure they are equipped to navigate it with confidence, critical thinking, and community support. When young people have rich, real-world experiences and meaningful relationships, their digital lives become additive to those connections, rather than a substitute for them. Community programs like ours are uniquely positioned to make that happen, because our staff are from the same communities and engage in the same online worlds as our students.

On behalf of Code in the Schools and the more than 2,000 young people we serve each year across Baltimore City, we respectfully urge a favorable report on HB1278. Maryland's young people deserve programs that meet them where they are—in their communities, in their digital lives, and in their full humanity. This bill makes that possible.

Respectfully submitted,

Stephanie Alphee, Co-Executive Director

Code in the Schools

Baltimore, Maryland

References

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