

HB0455 – Education – Certification of Scholarship Granting Organizations (Opting in on Opportunity Act)

Unfavorable Testimony

February 26, 2026

The Maryland Alliance for Racial Equity in Education (MAREE), a coalition of education advocacy, civil rights, and community-based organizations committed to eliminating racial disparities in Maryland’s education system, offers unfavorable testimony on HB0455, the “Opting in on Opportunity Act.”

HB0455 would require the Maryland State Department of Education to certify Scholarship Granting Organizations and submit them to the U.S. Department of the Treasury — the precise mechanism that allows Maryland taxpayers to claim the federal voucher tax credit created under the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act.” In other words, HB0455 is not a standalone education bill. It is Maryland’s formal opt-in to a federal privatization scheme that will drain resources from public schools, deepen segregation, and abandon the students who need support most. MAREE urges the Committee to issue an unfavorable report.

The federal voucher tax credit program that HB0455 would operationalize in Maryland is not a neutral expansion of educational options. It is a dollar-for-dollar tax credit estimated to cost the federal treasury up to \$51 billion per year — revenue that must be offset somewhere. The most likely targets are the federal programs Maryland public schools depend on: Title I funding for high-need students and IDEA funding for students with disabilities.

Maryland receives, on average, \$1,494 per student in federal education funding. That money supports 15,592 school staff across the state and provides essential services — paraprofessionals for students with special needs, school meals that represent students’ primary nutrition for the day, and instructional support for multilingual learners. HB0455 would make Maryland a willing participant in a federal program that puts all that funding at risk.

Proponents of HB0455 frame it as expanding opportunity. MAREE urges the Committee to examine the evidence carefully: voucher programs, by design and in practice, do not reach the students who most need educational investment. Private schools that would be certified as Scholarship Granting Organizations under HB0455 are under no obligation to serve all students. They retain full discretion to exclude:

- Students with low grades or test scores
- Students with disciplinary histories
- Students with disabilities — private schools are not required to provide special education services
- Multilingual learners
- LGBTQ+ students
- Students of minority faiths

The over-policing and adultification of Black and Brown youth, combined with chronic underinvestment in the schools that serve them, means students of color are more likely to fall into

one of these excluded categories — and therefore less likely to access the vouchers HB0455 would make available. Furthermore, voucher amounts historically fail to cover full private school tuition, and private schools routinely raise their tuition when voucher programs pass. Low-income families find themselves priced out of the very program marketed to them.

National data confirms what history has taught us: the majority of voucher users come from high-income families already enrolled in private schools. HB0455 would use state infrastructure to subsidize their tuition while leaving Maryland's most underserved students behind. Voucher programs were first created in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, designed to help white families flee integration. That origin is not merely historical — it is structural. The legacy persists in the documented pattern of private schools accepting vouchers while excluding students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families.

HB0455 carries no accountability requirements that would prevent this pattern from repeating in Maryland. Scholarship Granting Organizations would receive taxpayer dollars through the federal credit mechanism without any obligation to serve all students, report meaningful outcomes, or adhere to civil rights protections that apply to public schools. Maryland would be certifying these organizations — lending state credibility — without the ability to hold them accountable.

MAREE acknowledges that many Maryland families — particularly Black and Brown families — are rightfully frustrated with schools that have failed to meet their children's needs. That frustration is legitimate and rooted in generations of underfunding and neglect. But the answer to that failure is not to abandon the public education system. It is to fulfill the commitment Maryland has already made.

In 2019, Maryland enacted the Blueprint for Maryland's Future — a landmark, evidence-based investment in public education that includes:

- Additional funding targeted to high-need students
- Increased investment in educator training and development
- New accountability metrics to ensure every student is supported
- A commitment that every child receives an education preparing them for college or career

HB0455 offers none of these protections. It would redirect energy and resources away from the Blueprint's implementation and toward a federal scheme with no accountability, no equity guarantees, and no obligation to serve the students the Blueprint was designed to reach. Passing HB0455 would signal that Maryland is willing to undermine its own investment in public education at the behest of a federal policy agenda hostile to the very communities the Blueprint was built to serve.

Maryland does not have to opt into this program. That choice — to certify Scholarship Granting Organizations and connect Maryland taxpayers to the federal voucher credit — is precisely what HB0455 asks this Committee to authorize. MAREE urges the Committee to decline. Our students deserve an education system that works for everyone — not just those with the money, power, skin color, or background to be deemed eligible. Instead of opting into a program that will replicate historical inequities and defund the public schools our communities depend on, Maryland should reject HB0455, pass HB930, and continue to demonstrate its commitment to public education for every child.

MAREE urges the House Ways and Means Committee to issue an unfavorable report on HB0455.

peace & truth,
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