

BILL: Senate Bill 461
TITLE: Education - Prekindergarten Students - Funding
DATE: February 24, 2016
POSITION: SUPPORT
COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation Committee
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the State's twenty-four local boards of education, supports Senate Bill 461 because it would enhance the adequacy, reliability, and transparency of state and local funding for public prekindergarten programs for our most economically disadvantaged children.

MABE strongly supports enacting this legislation in 2016 to remedy the longstanding deficiency in funding provided to local school systems for prekindergarten, by including prekindergarten students in local school system enrollment counts for purposes of state and local funding formulas.

The proposed legislation is simple and straightforward. It would add an enrollment count for half-day prekindergarten students at a "full time equivalent" (FTE) rate of 50% to align the amount of mandated per pupil funding with the half-day scope of mandated prekindergarten programs. Systems providing full-day prekindergarten programs would appropriately report those students at the 100% FTE rate. In this way, Maryland's education funding law would include prekindergarten students as enrolled and guarantee transparent per pupil funding for the high quality prekindergarten programs offered in each of our 24 local school systems.

Under current law, all children who are four years old on September 1 of that school year, who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM) (i.e., from families whose income is at or below 185% of federal poverty guidelines (FPG)), and whose parent or guardian seeks to enroll the child in a public prekindergarten program, must be admitted free of charge to publicly funded prekindergarten programs established by each of the local boards of education.

State regulations require local school systems to provide prekindergarten for a minimum of 2.5 hours per day using certified early education teachers. However, prekindergarten students are not included in the annual September 30 enrollment counts for State education aid. By not counting approximately 30,000 students as enrolled, the state funding laws that provide per pupil state and local funding for all students are not triggered.

The Department of Legislative Services (DLS) has long maintained that the funding provided by the Bridge to Excellence Act addressed the phase-out of the Extended Elementary Education Program (EEEP), which funded prekindergarten programs at the time, by allocating 4% to 7% of the additional formula funding for the compensatory education program to support prekindergarten programs.

MABE has adopted the position in support of legislation to fund prekindergarten on a per pupil basis, including a 0.5 FTE for half-day students and 1.0 FTE for full-day students, without any off-setting reduction in compensatory education funding. MABE believes that any proposed reduction in compensatory education funding should be rejected as creating an undue burden on the economically disadvantaged kindergarten through 12th grade students on which per pupil compensatory education funding is actually based. All of these students deserve the full complement of funding to support their educations, and the recently expanded array of educational programs intended to benefit them and their futures.

Many school systems, in addition to the mandated half-day programs, also provide a significant amount of full-day prekindergarten to eligible students. Under this bill, providing full-day prekindergarten would remain entirely at the discretion of the local board, but such programs would receive full per pupil funding when offered. Examples of ongoing efforts include the increasing compulsory attendance age; and the dual enrollment and assessment and instructional mandates under the College and Career Readiness Act.

In late 2015, a study entitled “A Comprehensive Analysis of Prekindergarten in Maryland” was published by the consultants retained to conduct a series of adequacy studies concerning Maryland’s school finance system. The Prekindergarten Study makes several key findings which support the passage of this legislation. One stands out. According to the Study, the return on investment (ROI) for prekindergarten is “a return of \$4.36 for every dollar invested.” But the study finds that the ROI is even better for the investment proposed by this bill: “The highest return is seen in public school prekindergarten programs, at \$6.16 per \$1 invested.”

Again, MABE supports this legislation in order to guarantee that adequate, accurate and transparent per pupil funding is provided to support high quality public prekindergarten programs.

For these reasons, MABE urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 461.