

BILL: Senate Bill 706
TITLE: Maryland Education Credit
DATE: March 9, 2016
POSITION: OPPOSE
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, opposes Senate Bill 706. MABE opposes this legislation because it would facilitate the funding of private and parochial tuition scholarships through an income tax credit program.

Today, the Governor and General Assembly are poised to adopt a state budget which will fully fund the Thornton Bridge to Excellence Act and assure adequate funding for Maryland's public schools in the 2016-2017 school year. Local boards of education greatly appreciate these efforts to sustain funding for public education in the face of budget constraints. MABE and the local boards we represent believe strongly that Maryland should not forego tax revenue in exchange for a new state-administered program to provide grants to a new type of organization that will, in turn, provide funding to private and parochial schools for financial assistance for individual students.

The question is often raised whether these scholarships are vouchers, or at least substantially similar enough to vouchers to raise substantially similar objections. Maryland's local boards of education think so, for the following reasons. Traditional voucher programs typically involve direct payments of public funds to parents in the form of individual scholarships to send their children to private/parochial schools. Tuition tax credit programs, and the business contribution reimbursement program proposed in the FY 2017 State Budget, involve the offsetting of a significant percentage of the value of private contributions to organizations which in turn distribute those dollars to schools to provide to parents in the form of individual scholarships to send their children to private/parochial schools.

MABE opposes this legislation because whether state funding is being allocated to support a voucher program, or taxes otherwise owed are being diverted to do so, the state is inappropriately expending the energies and expertise of a state agency and its employees to run a voucher or voucher-like program for private and parochial schools.

MABE and all local boards of education support strong public accountability measures for every public dollar spent on education. Programs in non-public schools, both non-sectarian and parochial, are not linked to federal, State or local accountability measures. In addition, non-public schools generally are not subject to the same legal regulations as public schools, such as special education laws and teacher certification regulations.

This accountability gap has been widened by the past decade's dramatic expansion of the federal government's role in mandating student and school performance goals for public schools. This trend continues, as local school systems implement the Maryland College and Career Readiness Standards and the related student assessment program. As the bar is continuously being raised for public school performance, a new state-run program should not be created to divert tax dollars to finance private and parochial schools.

MABE recognizes that this legislation would also allow tax credit financed contributions to support educational expenses of public school students. Local boards appreciate that private contributions have long played a role in complementing the stable and legally defined funding received from the state and local governments. However, a major component of this legislation remains the establishment of a state government administered program to assist in financing private schools. It is this cornerstone of the Maryland Education Credit legislation which local boards strongly oppose enacting and making a permanent part of the State Budget.

Local boards of education urge the General Assembly to continue to invest taxpayer dollars, and state agency resources, in supporting our public schools – schools with open doors to all of Maryland's children every day – schools which are recognized nationally for excellence across the spectrum of programs from high quality early education programs to equitable access to rigorous academic offerings in high school.

For these reasons, MABE urges an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 706.