

BILL: House Bill 1222
TITLE: Maryland School Discipline Reform Act
POSITION: OPPOSE
DATE: February 28, 2017
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means Committee
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all twenty-four local boards of education, opposes House Bill 1222, which would mandate that each local board of education adopt the Maryland Guidelines for a State Code of Discipline (Guidelines) as their code of student discipline.

Following several years of deliberations, the State Board of Education adopted new regulations in 2014 to dramatically reform the ways in which school teachers, principals, and superintendents may suspend or expel students, and define the educational and behavioral supports to be provided to students in disciplinary situations.

Maryland school systems are committed to all of their students becoming college and career ready and ensuring that the appropriate use of school discipline furthers that goal. Therefore, MABE adopted the position of supporting the State Board's initiative to require local boards of education to reform their student discipline policies to:

- prohibit "zero tolerance" policies;
- reflect a philosophy that fosters positive behavior;
- provide continuous education services to all suspended and expelled students; and
- hold school systems accountable for reducing and eliminating disproportionate impacts of student discipline policies on minority students.

MABE offered comments supporting the State Board's regulatory reforms with amendments we believed were consistent with the intent of the reforms to ensure school safety, the fair administration of student discipline, the reduction and ultimate elimination of disparate impacts on minority and special education students, and uninterrupted student learning. The State Board agreed to some, but certainly not all, of MABE's amendments; ultimately adopting major reforms to longstanding student discipline regulations.

The regulations mandated that, by the beginning of school year 2014 - 2015, each local board shall review and revise its student discipline policies to be consistent with the new regulations. The new regulations redefine local board authority as follows:

"Each local board of education has both the responsibility and authority to adopt policies designed to create safe schools. In the context of school discipline, by the beginning of school year 2014-2015, each local board shall review and revise its student discipline policies and regulations with the goal of maintaining an environment of order, safety, and discipline necessary for effective learning.

The policies and regulations at minimum shall:

- (1) Reflect a discipline philosophy based on the goals of fostering, teaching, and acknowledging positive behavior;*
- (2) Be designed to keep students connected to school so that they may graduate college and career ready;*

- (3) Describe the conduct that may lead to in-school and out-of-school suspension or expulsion;*
- (4) Allow for discretion in imposing discipline;*
- (5) Address the ways the educational and counseling needs of suspended students will be met;*
and
- (6) Explain why and how long-term suspensions or expulsions are last-resort options.”*

More specifically, the new regulations introduce new terms and conditions for disciplining students, including definitions of short-term, long-term and extended suspensions, and expulsion. For example:

“Extended suspension” means the exclusion of a student from a student’s regular program for a time period between 11 and 45 school days, which only may occur under the following circumstances:

- (a) The superintendent or designated representative has determined that:*
 - (i) The student’s return to school prior to the completion of the suspension period would pose an imminent threat of serious harm to other students and staff; or*
 - (ii) The student has engaged in chronic and extreme disruption of the educational process that has created a substantial barrier to learning for other students across the school day, and other available and appropriate behavioral and disciplinary interventions have been exhausted.*
- (b) The superintendent or designated representative limits the duration of the exclusion to the shortest period practicable; and*
- (c) The school system provides the excluded student with comparable educational services and appropriate behavioral support services to promote successful return to the student’s regular academic program.”*

In these ways, these regulations have established new terms and conditions for removing a student from the school setting for disciplinary reasons; changes that MABE firmly believes are consistent with the intent of House Bill 1222. However, MABE respectfully requests that legislation not be enacted to convert the State’s Guidelines, which were never intended as regulatory enforcement measures, into mandatory state law.

For these reasons, MABE respectfully requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 1222.