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BILL: House Bill 1545
TITLE: State Board of Education – Nutrition Standards for Public School Food
DATE: March 2, 2018
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means Committee
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the state's local boards of education, opposes House Bill 1545.

MABE recognizes the importance of developing healthy school environments, which includes providing high quality health and physical education programs as well as meeting the nutritional needs of students through school breakfasts, lunches, afterschool meals, and vending machine policies. Therefore, MABE appreciates the intent of this legislation to ensure that school meals are of optimal nutritional value for our students. Local boards can assure the legislation that under Maryland's current school nutrition standards appropriately high standards are already in place.

For many years, local boards of education, superintendents, food service professionals, and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), have been working collaboratively to adopt regulations and policies which exceed federal requirements. Through these collective efforts, proposals for the strict fat free and low sodium standards included in this bill have been proposed, and rejected, as unreasonably strict and not conducive the success of our school meal programs.

Through the years, Maryland's state and local school officials have agreed on major revisions of Maryland's policy on competitive foods and foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNV). MABE believes that these efforts to improve school lunches and vending machine policies have successfully established a statewide approach that comprehensively addresses the nutritional needs and promote a healthier lifestyle for all of Maryland's public school students. Therefore, MABE opposes House Bill 1545 because it would impose significant changes to state and local student health and nutritional policies by mandating overly strict nutritional requirements on foods and beverages, and potentially prohibit the offering of healthy items.

In 2018, local boards of education are joining advocates for ending childhood hunger and promoting the health and learning of students, and supporting legislation such as House Bill 315. That bill would provide funding to address the problem that many low-income students are not able to participate in the school meal programs because their household income is too high to qualify for free meals, yet too low to afford the reduced-price school meal co-pays.

Federal and state standards for school nutrition have been reformed and enhanced to address the national epidemics of juvenile diabetes and obesity. At the same time, child hunger and inequitable access to healthy meals impacts far too many students as an obstacle to learning. Therefore, the federal government is also engaged in promoting improvements in expanding access to high quality school meal programs. In this context, MABE does not support the imposition of the standards proposed in House Bill 1545.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 1545.