

BILL: Senate Bill 729
TITLE: County Boards of Education - Length of School Year - Adjustments
DATE: March 23, 2018
POSITION: SUPPORT
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, supports Senate Bill 729 because it would provide much needed flexibility for local school systems to adopt annual school calendars.

In 2018, MABE's legislative priorities feature a focus on our support for continued governance autonomy for local boards of education to set education policy and school budgets which provide educational benefits for all students; and opposition to unfunded mandates. Specifically, MABE is seeking approval of enhanced local school calendar flexibility.

On August 31, 2016 Governor Hogan signed an Executive Order mandating a post-Labor Day start for all of Maryland's public schools beginning in 2017. The Order further mandated that that school year end by June 15th. MABE objected to this initiative as contrary to the principle of local governance, and the traditional role of boards of education and their communities in setting school calendars. The State Board of Education responded to the first Executive Order by indicating its willingness to favorably consider waiver requests.

Then, on October 11, 2016, Governor Hogan issued a second, amended Executive Order to forestall the intention of the State Board of Education to consider and grant waivers from the post-Labor Day through June 15 school year based on a local board of education's showing that commencing their academic calendar before Labor Day would provide educational benefit to students. The second Executive Order repeals the previous waiver language and insists that the State Board follow formal regulatory procedures in adopting waiver criteria. In addition, the Order requires that local boards establish a "compelling justification" for any requested waiver by satisfying all elements stipulated in the Order.

Senate Bill 729 will alleviate at least some of the barriers to local decision making on school calendars, by authorizing a local board of education to extend the school year for up to five days without approval from the State Board of Education. In addition, the bill would facilitate a local board's ability to request a waiver from the State Board of Education for a reduction in school days. In these ways, this bill would greatly assist local boards in determining how to adjust their respective local school calendars.

MABE strongly opposed legislation in 2015 (Senate Bill 455/House Bill 389) and 2016 (Senate Bill 767/House Bill 1349) which would have prohibited public schools from opening before the day after Labor Day (MABE testimony). MABE supports preserving and protecting the rights of local communities and their respective boards of education to adopt school calendars; school calendars that reflect not only state testing schedules and mandated holidays, but also other important local considerations. Local boards serve a broad constituency of professional educators, parents, students, businesses and other community groups. Local boards believe that imposing a statewide start date for the school year would impose unwarranted restrictions on the prerogative of local communities to consider and decide on their local school system calendar.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 729.