

BILL: House Bill 536
TITLE: Education - Public Charter Schools - Virtual Learning Programs
DATE: February 21, 2019
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 536 because it would expand the definition of public charter school to include virtual learning programs.

MABE appreciates the bill's intent to expand virtual learning opportunities for Maryland students. However, MABE opposes expanding the definition of a public charter school to include applications to create virtual, or cyber, charter schools.

MABE believes that the ability to use technology is essential to our students' college and career readiness and success. Therefore, MABE believes that virtual and distance learning programs and strategies can be effective adjuncts to traditional classroom instruction. MABE does not support passage of this legislation because local school systems are already fully authorized to provide appropriate virtual learning opportunities, and to authorize public charter schools to do so, under existing law.

Further, MABE does not endorse the proposal to significantly amend the Charter School Act because local boards of education strongly believe that the law continues to provide a sound framework for the authorization and operation of high quality public charter schools in Maryland. Today, more than 15,000 students attend approximately 50 public charter schools; schools which are operating successfully within the framework established by the Public Charter School Act. MABE firmly believes that it is no accident that our charter schools have not experienced the failures of accountability and performance in the areas of student achievement or financial management all too common in charter schools in other states.

MABE supports state and local efforts to pursue the effective use of virtual learning initiatives and will continue to support programs to optimize the use of technology in improving student instruction. For example, access to digital resources and virtual learning opportunities are being advanced through collaboration among local school systems and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), through initiatives such as the Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities Program (MVLO). MABE recognizes the value and need to continuously improve student access to high quality virtual learning programs, but opposes amending the charter school law to authorize virtual, cyber charter schools. This legislation is not a necessary or appropriate means to advance virtual learning in Maryland's public schools.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 536.