

May 17, 2019

Dr. Karen B. Salmon  
State Superintendent of Schools  
Maryland State Department of Education  
200 West Baltimore Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Dr. Justin M. Hartings, President  
Maryland State Board of Education  
200 West Baltimore Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Dear Drs. Salmon and Hartings:

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing Maryland's 24 local boards of education, requests your consideration of the following concerns as the State Board considers modifications to regulations governing intradistrict student transfers within local school systems.

#### Most Student Transfer Requests are Granted

On behalf of local boards, MABE strongly supports maintaining the current, locally controlled, process of reviewing and deciding on requests for intradistrict student transfers. The volume of intradistrict transfer requests is staggering, and the overwhelming majority of these requests are granted. In 2017-2018, a total of 27,418 requests were made and 24,270, 88.5% of these requests were granted. (Factors that Impact Student Transfers, MSDE, Dec. 4, 2018) (see Attachment). Based on this track record, MABE firmly believes that each local school system is reasonably and legally administering intradistrict student transfers in accordance with local board policies and procedures.

#### Local Board Governance and Decision-Making Authority

The rationale for supporting the current standard of review is because it appropriately recognizes the local board role in crafting student transfer policies that reflect local school system and community priorities and needs. In 2017-2018, one school system granted 100% of requested transfers, and while most granted over 70%, one school system granted 51%. Nonetheless, that one school system granted more than 300 requests. The review and decision-making process of literally thousands of student transfer requests should remain within the purview of local school systems. MABE urges the State Board to reaffirm its support for the policy-making role of local boards, and the efficacy of the professional judgment of school system staff to respond to student transfer requests in accordance with locally adopted board policies and procedures.

#### Standard of Review and Burden of Proof

MABE supports preserving the current and longstanding standard of review and burden of proof applied by the State Board in deciding student transfer cases; the same standards applied in all other cases involving appeals from local board decisions in accordance with local board policies.

The standard of review in a student transfer decision is that the local board is considered prima facie correct, and the State Board may not substitute its judgment for that of the local board unless the decision is arbitrary, unreasonable, or illegal. COMAR 13A.01.05.05A; see *Ralph and Tremaine N. v. Montgomery County Bd. of Educ.*, MSBE Op. No. 17-30 (2017). A decision is arbitrary or unreasonable if “it is contrary to sound educational policy” or if “a reasoning mind could not have reasonably reached the conclusion the local board or local superintendent reached.” COMAR 13A.01.05.05 (B)(1) & (2). The Appellant has the burden of proof by a preponderance of the evidence. COMAR 13A.01.05.05(D).

Throughout the years the State Board has considered many appeals and consistently upheld the vast majority of local board decisions to deny student transfer requests. That said, the current standard of review and burden of proof afford the State Board the opportunity to consider and reverse local board decisions if determined to be arbitrary, unreasonable, or illegal, or having failed to meet the evidentiary burden of proof. Again, this is the same set of standards applied by the State Board in all other policy-related cases.

MABE urges the State Board to continue to hold school systems accountable by ensuring that they are not being unreasonable, arbitrary or illegal. MABE cautions against any proposal to adopt a *de novo* standard of review that would result in the State Board determination of the merits of thousands of student transfer cases, presumably following hundreds of thousands of hours of evidentiary hearings in the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH).

#### Best Interest of the Student

MABE is deeply troubled by the consideration of adopting a “best interest of the student” analysis pertaining to student transfer requests for two reasons. First, the best interest standard is ill-equipped to be applied in the enormous volume of cases currently arising under current policies. And the volume of requests could only be expected to increase exponentially under the new standard. MABE notes, with concern, examples of the best interest standard already being applied to cases involving homeless students, and students in foster care or out-of-home placement. There are simply far fewer of such cases, and federal laws governing foster care and homeless student services, making these cases far from analogous to student transfer requests.

Secondly, MABE asserts that shifting to the best interest analysis would pose a serious threat to Maryland’s efforts to enhance equity in the teaching and learning of students. MABE requests that the State Board apply an equity lens to this policy area.

- Who are the underrepresented groups affected by this policy, program, practice, decision, or action?
- What are the potential impacts on these groups?
- Does this policy, program, practice, decision, or action worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences?

MABE believes that following such analysis, the State Board should reject proposed changes to the standards for student transfer cases. MABE believes adopting the best interest analysis would incentivize transfer requests, and subsequent appeals and litigation, based on costly medical and legal analysis available to parents in an inequitable manner. MABE also believes that one of the most troubling unintended but foreseeable consequences of adopting such a policy shift would be the further resegregation of public school enrollment.

### Open Enrollment

Only recently has the State Board begun to opine, first in statements of abstention, and then in majority opinions, that local school systems should be even more deferential to student transfer requests. For example, in a statement in abstention, a board member stated, “Most basically, I fail to see a compelling rationale for restricting parental choice when space and facilities may be available in the school preferred by the parent ...” (*Allen S. v. Anne Arundel County Board of Education*, MSBE Op. No. 18-01). MABE cites the compelling rationales contained in each local school system transfer policy, including childcare, curriculum, hardship, and best interests of the student. By contrast, replacing these criteria with “parental choice” could limit or eliminate the availability of transfers for the compelling reasons articulated in local policies, shifting access to transfers to parents with the means to provide transportation, be selected through lotteries, or be first in line. To MABE, these do not appear to be compelling rationales. Instead, shifting to such an “open enrollment” system would raise the specter of widening equity and opportunity gaps.

Interestingly, the countywide nature of Maryland’s school systems may be a significant factor in understanding why the Education Commission of the States (ECS) cites Maryland as an outlier in terms of not having state-level “open enrollment” student transfer policies. So is North Carolina, which is one of only a very small number of states (including Alaska and Hawaii) with countywide school districts. MABE posits that the reason neither Maryland nor North Carolina have adopted statewide intradistrict open enrollment laws may be that open enrollment poses uniquely impractical and unworkable challenges on a countywide basis. MABE believes this is certainly the case in Maryland, with serious administrative and legal challenges anticipated relating particularly to equity.

### Open Enrollment and Equity

MABE believes the proposed changes would pose a significant threat to equity in the delivery of instruction to Maryland’s diverse student population. Increasingly, school systems are attending to the equitable allocation of resources among schools within the school system. Equity in access to high quality teaching and learning is a key objective under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Maryland’s Blueprint for Maryland’s Future developed by the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education (Kirwan). MABE believes that a new “open enrollment” system would frustrate or thwart efforts to allocate school-based resources to enhance equity as we address lagging student performance among identified groups of struggling students. Instead, open enrollment could facilitate school flight in a manner that would disproportionately benefit parents with time and resources to provide transportation for their students throughout the countywide school system.

Dr. Karen B. Salmon  
Dr. Justin M. Hartings

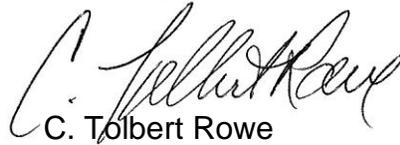
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In conclusion, MABE believes that any of the proposed changes to either the standard of review or burden of proof would be extremely disruptive to the operation of Maryland's 24 countywide school systems.

Thank you, again, for your intentional efforts to seek stakeholder input. We appreciate this practice and look forward to continuing our collaboration in the future.

Sincerely,



C. Tolbert Rowe  
President

CTR:kwb

Copy to:

MABE Board of Directors  
Local Board President/Chairs  
Superintendents of Schools/Chief Executive Officers  
Frances Hughes Glendening, MABE Executive Director  
Renee Spence, PSSAM Executive Director