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BILL: House Bill 566
TITLE: County Boards of Education - Virtual Schools - Requirement
DATE: February 5, 2021
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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 566.

MABE appreciates the bill's intent to expand virtual learning opportunities for Maryland students. However, MABE opposes doing so by imposing a statewide mandate that each local board establish a virtual school. This bill would impose on every school system the mandate to establish a virtual school platform for students in every grade and do so in the 2021-2022 school year.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in statewide school facility closures and necessitated the immediate transition to distance learning through access to online platforms and other instructional materials from mid-March through the end of the school year. The demands on local school systems to provide almost exclusively online instruction to Maryland's nearly 1 million students, including the provision of tens of thousands of digital devices, has highlighted the significant and inequitable gaps in student, family, and community access to the broadband services needed to access online instruction.

Long before the pandemic, MABE advocated for funding and policies at the State and federal levels to enhance the ability of local school systems to utilize and make available educational technology that is essential to our students' college and career readiness and success. Again, before school closures mandated the shift to digital and distance learning, local boards recognized that virtual and distance learning programs and strategies are effective adjuncts to traditional classroom instruction.

MABE does not support passage of House Bill 566 because local school systems are already fully authorized to provide appropriate virtual learning opportunities under existing law, and the costly and burdensome imposition of a permanent mandate to operate a comprehensive virtual school program in each of Maryland's 24 school systems. MABE continues to support 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. MABE recognizes the value and need to continuously improve student access to high quality virtual learning programs, but opposes the approach taken in House Bill 566.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 566.