

BILL: Senate Bill 664
TITLE: Education - High School Graduation Requirements - Application
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
DATE: February 25, 2021
COMMITTEE: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports the intent of Senate Bill 664 to promote the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to the U.S. Department of Education or the Maryland State Financial Aid Application (MSFAA) to the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) by as many students as possible before graduating from high school. MABE is supporting this legislation with the amendments being requested by the bill sponsor.

Similar legislation introduced in 2020 raised serious concerns regarding the unintended consequences of administering this program as a rigid graduation requirement on which a student's eligibility for graduation could hinge. MABE appreciates the development and consideration of several amendments to provide reasonable, expanded opportunities for students and staff to opt out of completing a financial aid application, to launch the initiative as a pilot program, and to establish an advisory committee to inform the statewide effort to increase equitable access to affordable higher education for many more students.

MABE's 2021 legislative platform reflects the association's adoption of an equity core value, equity resolution, and equity lens. For MABE, educational equity in Maryland means providing access to essential academic, social, emotional, and economic supports in order to engage each student in rigorous well-rounded instruction toward them achieving their highest potential as learners and citizens. MABE has pledged to reflect the core value of equity in the decision-making processes of the association including the priorities and positions of the legislative committee.

In this context, MABE agrees that the State and local school systems should make a concerted effort, as called for in this bill, to have as many students and families as possible complete financial aid forms, and thereby become fully informed of the available financial aid offerings to continue their education. MABE is a leading proponent of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Act and comprehensive funding and policy reforms to promote college and career readiness for each student. This means instilling this mission in students and teachers beginning in elementary school and ensuring that all high schools are promoting high expectations for all students to prepare them for successfully continuing their education in college and career training and certification programs.

MABE recognizes the historic and devastating impacts of the ongoing public health and economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 coronavirus. This is also an educational crisis, and MABE's legislative positions represent MABE's commitment to equity and excellence and to a strong educational recovery from the ongoing crisis on behalf of each of our nearly 1 million students. MABE believes that Senate Bill 664 would establish a program to promote access to financial assistance for higher education and would benefit precisely those students and families most heavily impacted by the ongoing pandemic.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 664 with amendments to provide an optimum degree of awareness, access, and flexibility for parents, students, and staff to promote the completion of financial aid applications in an equitable manner that best serves students and families.