

BILL: Senate Bill 573
TITLE: School Health and Vision Services - Screenings and Eye Examinations
DATE: February 24, 2023
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) opposes Senate Bill 573 which would establish the Vision for Maryland Program, significantly expand the scope of mandated school-based vision screenings, and dictate very prescriptive procedures and vision services in response to student behaviors. MABE notes that any mandated expansion of the annual vision screening impacts both local school systems and county health departments, both of which are required to provide vision screenings to students as specified in the law. MABE also notes that a prior version of this bill would have placed the Vision for Maryland Program within the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) rather than the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

Under this bill, MSDE would be required to administer the Vision for Maryland Program Pediatric Vision Program to provide eye examinations to students who fail the required vision screening and eyeglasses if determined necessary by the examination. MABE supports maintaining the current law, under §7-404 of the Education Article, which requires student hearing and vision screenings. For many years the requirements were for grades four, five, or six and grade nine. More recently these requirements were updated to require vision screenings upon entering school, in grade one, and grade eight or nine. If, as proposed in this bill, the mandated annual vision screenings are expanded to include either third or fourth grade, the costs for doing so would be imposed on local school systems or local health departments, depending on the locally developed program.

MABE supports a statewide approach to vision screening that ensures the timely assessment of each student's hearing and vision health condition. Therefore, MABE appreciates the bill's proposal to mandate state funding to ensure that the administration and costs to support the new state programs proposed under this bill. However, given that the costs of administering the required vision screenings are the responsibility of school systems and local governments, MABE must also highlight the equity issues arising from expanding the scope of the mandated services without sufficient state funding. This bill would not only expand the number of mandated vision screenings, but would also require school systems to "ensure" that a student receives the recommended eyeglasses. As laudable as this goal is, it must be supported by state resources to ensure equity for each student and family.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 573.