

BILL: Senate Bill 161
TITLE: Community Schools - Alterations
DATE: January 24, 2024
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports Senate Bill 161 in order to advance the successful development of community schools as a core component of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future. MABE, on behalf of all local boards, strongly supports the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future and its vision for a world-class public education system for all students. MABE supports the improvements Senate Bill 161 would make to the community schools program with the exception of a proposal at the end of the bill to essentially allow MSDE to rewrite local community schools needs assessments and implementation plans.

The Blueprint provides significant funding to support the planning and operation of community schools in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. The Blueprint law defines a community school as a public school that establishes a set of strategic partnerships between the school and other community resources that promote student achievement, positive learning conditions, and the well-being of students, families, and the community by providing wraparound services. In light of the complexity and inherently local nature of the community schools model and program, MABE requests amendments to preserve local decision-making regarding community schools plans.

MABE supports Senate Bill 161 because at the local level the bill would provide much needed flexibility to utilize a small portion of community schools funding for systemwide coordination of programs and services. In addition, the bill would enhance the role of standards and performance measures at the state level within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Although MABE and local school systems have concerns with the scope of these reforms, MABE believes the bill is poised to establish a better balance of state and local roles and responsibilities toward the success of community schools.

However, MABE strongly objects to the section of the bill that we believe would upset this balance. Therefore, MABE is requesting an amendment to remove the new proposal to empower MSDE to dictate provisions of local community schools needs assessments and plans. These are, in fact, local community schools with school-based coordinators responsible for creating extensive plans reflecting intensive local community engagement. This local work should not be subjected to state level bureaucratic orders to modify a community school’s plan or programming.

To illustrate the complexity and nuance of community schools, which are responsible for coordinating wraparound services for students and their families, the Blueprint law defines wraparound services, as follows:

“Wraparound services” means:

- (1) Extended learning time, including before and after school, weekends, summer school, and an extended school year;
- (2) Safe transportation to and from school and off-site apprenticeship programs;
- (3) Vision and dental care services;

- (4) Establishing or expanding school-based health center services;
- (5) Additional social workers, mentors, counselors, psychologists, and restorative practice coaches;
- (6) Enhancing physical wellness, including providing healthy food for in-school and out-of-school time and linkages to community providers;
- (7) Enhancing behavioral health services, including access to mental health practitioners and providing professional development to school staff to provide trauma-informed interventions;
- (8) Providing family and community engagement and supports, including informing parents of academic course offerings, language classes, workforce development training, opportunities for children, and available social services as well as educating families on how to monitor a child's learning;
- (9) Establishing and enhancing linkages to Judy Centers and other early education programs that feed into the school;
- (10) Enhancing student enrichment experiences, including educational field trips, partnerships, and programs with museums, arts organizations, and cultural institutions;
- (11) Improving student attendance;
- (12) Improving the learning environment at the school; and
- (13) Any professional development for teachers and school staff to quickly identify students who are in need of these resources.

The breadth and scope of building a community school needs assessment and plan involves these wraparound services and much more. And the Blueprint clearly intends for this to be community-based process of engagement, buy-in, and partnership. Therefore, MABE requests an amendment to strike the bill's new provisions beginning with "FOR APPROVAL" in line 21 on page 11, through line 4 on page 12. Again, local school systems are very supportive of the community schools model and programs and committed to the success of community-based strategies to dramatically enhance the availability of wraparound services for students and families. Creating a community school is an inherently local process, and MABE urges the adoption of amendments to ensure that this continues to be reflected in the law.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 161 with amendments to maintain the balance of state guidance and standards, and local school system coordination and operation of community schools through community engagement.