

September 14, 2018

Dr. William (Brit) Kirwan, Chair
Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education
Room 121, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chairman Kirwan:

On behalf of the nine Eastern Shore Superintendents of Schools who represent the rural communities of our region, I want to thank you and the members of the Commission for your time, energy, talents, and commitment to engage in a comprehensive process to research, study, and explore policies to strengthen our educational services to meet the needs of our students.

As we know, Maryland is a very diverse state from the Atlantic Ocean to the Appalachian Mountains and from urban centers to rural farmland. The twenty-four school systems and nearly 1,500 schools in Maryland are very diverse. Regardless of zip code, students have the same educational needs but the process to meet those needs may vary depending of geographic, demographic, and economic circumstances. As leaders, we must adopt policies to assure that each student graduates from high school both college and career ready. As you continue to engage in the process to identify, review and refine recommendations, we ask that you strongly consider the unique challenges faced by rural school systems:

Geography: In Maryland, we have a teacher shortage. In rural areas, the recruitment and retention of teachers has reached a critical point. In fields such as STEM, special education, and therapists, we cannot find a sufficient number of qualified candidates. The success of our students directly depends upon the quality of our teachers. We are asking you to adopt recommendations that provide significant incentives for people to enter the field of teaching and teach in rural areas. Also, in rural school systems transportation is a major cost center. On the Eastern Shore, over 94% of our students are eligible to ride a school bus. As an example, during the 2017 – 18 school year, school buses on the Shore traveled over 12 million miles or an average of 66,700 miles per school day to transport students to and from school. In addition, one school system on the Shore has a 'boat bus'. As you consider the costs of pre-kindergarten and extended day and extended summer programs, transportation in rural areas must be considered. We are asking you to include recommendations that provide adequate funding for student transportation.

Demographics: On the Shore, we have the school system in Maryland with the smallest student population (Kent – 1,993 students as compared to Montgomery with largest student population at 161,546 students) and the school system with one of the largest geographic areas (Dorchester – 540 square miles). Our 129 schools range in size from 11 students (Ewell Elementary School) to over 1,400 students (James M. Bennett High School). Three of our nine Shore school systems are majority minority school systems (Dorchester, Somerset, and Wicomico) and over 40% of our students identify themselves as minorities. In addition, nearly 50% of our students are being raised in single head of household homes or by their grandparents. Also, our English Language Learner population continues to grow. We are asking you to include recommendations that provide significant increased funding to address the challenges of poverty, family support, special education, and support for English Language Learners.

Economics: Agriculture is the mainstay of our economy. Over 50% of our students are eligible for free or reduced meals. On the Shore, we have two of the poorest counties in our state. Unemployment, low median household income and household poverty rates continue to be challenges. During the last decade, a majority of county governments on the Shore have provided a maintenance of effort allocation which has created significant challenges for school systems. In many instances, as state aid has increased local aid has decreased or met minimum funding levels. We are asking you to include a recommendation that redefines the local county maintenance of effort requirement to increase local funding.

Rural school systems face unique challenges. As we have learned from our experience, “one size does not fit all”. Strategies or approaches that may be effective in Maryland urban and suburban communities may not be as effective or counterproductive in rural areas. As you consider and refine recommendations, we ask that you focus on the why (research based rationale), what (human and fiscal resources needed), and who (outcome for students) and allow local elected Boards of Education working with their Superintendents of Schools to determine the how (process to implement).

We thank and commend you for your work. As you continue your work, if we can provide additional information or assistance, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely yours,



Dr. Patricia Saelens, President
Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium
Superintendent of the Caroline County Public Schools

Pc: Eastern Shore Superintendents of Schools
Dr. Jon M. Andes, Executive Director of ESMEC
Renee Spence, Executive Director of PSSAM