

Maryland Association of Boards of Education
Comments to the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, I am Tolbert Rowe, a member of the Caroline County Board of Education and President-Elect of the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE). On behalf of MABE, and representing Maryland's 24 local boards of education, I appreciate the opportunity to address the Commission to voice strong support for updating and enhancing Maryland's public school finance system.

MABE believes that significant funding increases are needed to support equitable access for all students to an excellent education. MABE also believes that local boards must be at the helm, fulfilling the responsibility to govern school systems in the best interests of all students.

MABE urges the Commission to fulfill its primary charge and address the adequacy study's overarching conclusion that there is an enormous statewide funding gap. Substantially more per pupil funding is required not only to prepare all students to succeed based on higher standards in reading, math and science, but also to fund new programs such as universal prekindergarten and more robust college and career readiness programs, including dual enrollment, career technology education, and apprenticeship programs.

The funding gap did not happen overnight. According to the General Assembly's analysis, in 2002 the statewide adequacy gap was \$1.1 billion. The Bridge to Excellence Act closed this gap by 2008. But by 2015, there was a statewide adequacy gap of \$1.6 billion. State funding increases flattened out by 2008 and have not been revisited – and that was nearly a decade ago.

Fortunately, we know that during the years of significant funding increases, Maryland's students outperformed the nation and achieved top national rankings. In 2008, a national consulting firm, MGT of America, conducted an evaluation of the effect of increased state aid to local school systems. They found that local school systems "demonstrated substantial improvements in the percentages of their student populations who were proficient in reading and mathematics." In other words, what they found was that money does, in fact, matter.

But the Bridge to Excellence Act was about more than just dollars – it was a nationally recognized success, built on four cornerstone principles of adequacy, equity, accountability, and flexibility. MABE believes that the Commission should apply the same principles to updating the State's public school finance system.

Therefore, MABE asks the Commission to develop recommendations to fully fund an excellent statewide system of public schools, equitably allocate state funding to local school systems to

benefit the teaching and learning of all students, continue to hold local school systems accountable for results, and to affirm the governance role of local boards.

The local governance role performed by local boards is vital to engaging the local community in policy-making and in advocating for annual budgets that effectively combine state and local resources to best serve our students. As the Commission considers any reforms to school system governance at the state or local level, MABE urges recognition of the considerable success Maryland has achieved by having a strong partnership between local boards and state policy makers, whether in the General Assembly, State Department of Education or State Board of Education.

On behalf of local boards, MABE led the advocacy effort to create this Commission precisely so that an updated adequacy study and other funding and accountability issues could be debated and transformed into legislation to update and improve Maryland's school finance system, not radically reform its governance system.

MABE believes that Maryland can and should move forward by adopting meaningful changes to our current school finance system – a system we can all be proud of – but which now dates back to 2002. Specifically, the Commission should develop comprehensive recommendations to enhance our school finance system by increasing the base amount of funding for all students, sustaining the additional “weighted” per pupil funding for our students learning English, and students living in poverty, and increasing the weighted funding amount for students receiving special education services. And it is time to enact a statewide program to expand access to high quality prekindergarten, especially for our most economically disadvantaged students and families.

A top priority for MABE is that state and local per pupil funding should be made available for all of the prekindergarten students we currently serve – and could serve if per pupil funding were provided. Local boards recognize the value of high quality early learning opportunities for all children, and especially students with special needs. The return on investment for each dollar spent is significant, benefitting individual students academically and increasing their lifelong earning potential. By not counting prekindergarten students as enrolled, and therefore not providing a per pupil amount of either state or local funding, Maryland is grossly underfunding a program widely recognized as the best investment we can make in our students' futures.

Maryland has a proven track record as the best statewide school system in the nation for many years. MABE sees no rationale for adopting a new governance model, or creating a new board or bureaucracy, when we know that Maryland's state and local boards of education and educational leaders are up to the task – and can and should be held accountable – for achieving excellence for all students when provided constitutionally adequate resources.

MABE is confident that through incremental implementation of funding recommendations developed by this Commission and enacted by the General Assembly, Maryland can renew its commitment to fulfilling its constitutional mandate to fully fund and support an excellent education for all students.

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