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

Dear Dr. Kirwan:

On behalf of the Maryland State Education Association and our 73,000 educators, I appreciate the work that you and the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education have done thus far. Your efforts to gather information and make recommendations to better link policy outcomes with school funding formulas will allow our members and our schools to better meet the needs of all students. Like you, we know this effort will take a long-term commitment to a shared vision of what our schools look like, but will also require substantial funding increases.

MSEA will continue to engage tens of thousands of our members in conversations around their needs and priorities for funding and innovation. We are prepared and committed to building a movement of our members to win passage for a bold new investment in and vision for public education. But even as that organizing takes place, I want to share our association priorities that are informed by testimony and data your Commission has collected and educator feedback from all across the state based on in-person meetings, leadership conversations, and member focus groups and polling.

### **MEMBER FEEDBACK: BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS**

There were two overarching frustrations that came through as we have talked to members:

1. Our members are overworked and undervalued, and
2. They are overwhelmed by non-academic barriers to student success, namely poverty.

These two barriers to student success are backed up by strong academic research. According to the RAND Corporation “research suggests that, among school-related factors, teachers matter most. When it comes to student performance...a teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school factor, including services, facilities, and even leadership.”

However, in one-on-one interviews our members suggest that many of our best educators leave the profession because it offers lower compensation, poorer working conditions, and less respect than comparable careers.<sup>1</sup> This is caused by deprived service credit on their pay scales, unfunded contracts, understaffing, micromanaging via top-down mandates, insufficient time for planning and individualized instruction, worsening student behavior, a lack of promotion opportunities that involve working with students, lackluster professional development and early career support, and political attacks.

Our 24 school districts simply have not invested enough in their workforces to meet the needs of all students. Whether it was the psychologist we spoke to who has 2,400 students on her caseload, or the Career Technology & Education (CTE) department chair of her school who has lost half of her staff in the last few years, or the

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<sup>1</sup> Feedback from our members is reflective of research from the Learning Policy Institute in Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Available online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/solving-teachershortage> (Accessed on October 11, 2017.)

chorus teacher who described her band teacher colleague trying to teach computer keyboarding because the school cut the position, our members described an overflowing workload that leaves students falling between the cracks.

But even if we created a school system that gets everything about academics right, we would still fall short of closing achievement gaps without also addressing challenges arising outside of our schools. The research linking socioeconomic status and poverty to student achievement is so concrete as to be completely daunting. RAND concludes that “compared with teachers, individual and family characteristics may have four to eight times the impact on student achievement.”

Our members described systems unprepared to face the challenges low-income students bring with them every day. An alternative school teacher told us there’s no mental health staff available for students who need to decompress from trauma or stress outside of school. A special educator told us about how his job responsibilities last year included convincing the apartment building property manager for many of his students’ families to address a long-neglected black mold problem in their homes.

## PRIORITIES

While MSEA strongly supports many of the priority areas discussed by the Commission, including universal pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds and career technology education expansion, we recommend that the Commission prioritize the following policy objectives:

1. Improve the salary and working conditions of all educator professions, and
2. Comprehensively address poverty through both academic and non-academic supports.

The workforce challenges fall into two policy objectives: bringing compensation in line with comparable professions (or for many education support professionals, or ESP members, a living wage) and increasing staff—both teachers and ESP (especially para-educators). To address poverty and achievement gaps, MSEA wants to significantly expand the number of community schools in Maryland, in addition to addressing student behavioral issues by providing appropriate training, programs, and resources.

### PRIORITY 1: INCREASE SALARY

Teachers don’t go into the profession to get rich—they do it to make a difference—and that influences the way our members talk about salary. But it is our job to speak up for educators and for the state to recognize that increasing salaries is a student issue. It remains one of the most effective strategies for ensuring that every student has access to qualified educators. Polling results show that Marylanders agree with that analysis when they identify teacher salaries as their top priority for improving schools with additional education funding.

Maryland has a solid ranking for teacher salary, but we still fall behind two of the three key comparison states used by the Commission.

STATE	AVERAGE SALARY (2016)
Maryland	66,456
Massachusetts	76,981
New Hampshire	56,616
New Jersey	69,330

After jumping up from \$50,261 to \$62,849 from 2003 to 2008, the average teacher salary for Maryland has remained relatively flat ever since—rising slightly to \$64,546 in 2013 and \$66,456 in 2016. This stagnation has

resulted in Maryland teachers falling behind other comparable professions, making 84 cents on the dollar according to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). To erase the teacher pay penalty—or the money given up by teachers to stay in the profession—Maryland would have to bring its average teacher salary up to \$79,126, or slightly more than the average Massachusetts teacher makes today.

MSEA is eager to engage in conversations with the Commission on how to structure a career lattice that allows educators to grow and earn more money without having to leave a profession they love and in which they are accomplished. We strongly recommend that the Commission allow plenty of time for the development and implementation of a teacher leader model in order to generate buy-in from staff and ensure for a smooth transition from current leadership structures. We are wary of Iowa’s mixed results in implementing their statewide teacher leadership program and believe more transition time might help improve student outcomes. That being said, as we begin to encourage local boards of education and exclusive bargaining representatives to develop and implement early frameworks of local career lattices, it is imperative that we increase salaries starting immediately --- likely in the form of a cost of living adjustment to each step of the scale, and on each scale in the state. A phase-in of a significant pay raise should be structured to bring Maryland in line with the average salary of Massachusetts teachers and to eliminate the teacher pay penalty identified by EPI.

For ESP, MSEA requests the Commission support recommendations to implement a regionally-indexed living wage guarantee. It is clear that the second-class status feeling of many ESP is driven in large part by lower salaries, especially for food-service workers and others living in poverty. It should be a moral obligation for the state to ensure that every school employee can support a family on their salary.

**PRIORITY 2: INCREASE STAFF**

It was clear from all of our research and member feedback that schools are at their core on-the-ground staff, and right now, there are simply not enough people working in schools to give every student the individualized instruction they need. Increasing staff allows us to tackle a number of priorities, including:

- Expanding planning and professional learning time, especially for new educators;
- Implementing locally-developed career lattices;
- Release time for mentors;
- Time to communicate and engage with parents;
- Maximize individualized instruction with an increase in para-educators;
- More teachers in special content areas (music, CTE, computer science, etc.); and,
- Generally reduce class sizes and caseloads.

Our feedback from members is supported by comparison data. Maryland has a larger students per teacher ratio than the three comparison states, according to National Education Association data.

STATE	STUDENTS/TEACHER (2016)
Maryland	14.6
Massachusetts	13.2
New Hampshire	12.5
New Jersey	11.9

The Thornton funding formula initially made a significant difference in hiring more teachers, driving the students per teacher ratio from 15.7 in 2003 to 14.1 in 2008. But with the recession slowing the growth of education

funding, that ratio went up to 14.7 in 2013 and has plateaued to where it is now at 14.6—well behind other top-performing states.

It is especially important that initial funding dedicated to increasing staff be initially targeted at high-poverty schools, with funding becoming available to more schools throughout implementation based on the number of students coming from low-income households. We also want to stress the importance of increasing staff while implementing career lattices to account for the instruction time necessary for the development of teacher leaders.

### PRIORITY 3: ADDRESS POVERTY

When we asked members to describe the biggest barriers to student learning, poverty and student behavior were the most common responses. They feel the burden of making up for inequities outside the school building without having any of the resources to make it happen. Many expressed a desire for school structures to change so students could have their non-academic needs met (mental health, nutrition, dental, vision, etc.) in the same place they are trying to learn. That is why MSEA is such a strong supporter of prioritizing community schools and training programs such as restorative practices as parts of the school funding calculation, especially as strategies to targeting low-performing schools and schools within concentrated areas of poverty.

MSEA is part of a strong coalition in Maryland pushing for community school expansion. At the same time, there is also a tremendous amount of momentum within our membership behind the use of restorative practices as an alternative to punitive discipline. Taking away expulsion and suspension as discipline options without providing a supportive alternative that addresses behavioral issues hurts student learning in our schools. That's why scaling up training programs, staffing, and additional support resources in our schools is an urgent need.

But we cannot just focus on students with behavioral problems if we want to close achievement gaps. Doing well in school—and in life—requires empathy for others, an ability to work well in teams, motivation, and self-respect. In many ways, these social and emotional skills are prerequisites for students to do well in math, reading, and writing. Maryland can follow the lead of Illinois in implementing social and emotional learning standards to address this need in our schools.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To summarize, we recommend the following policy priorities for the Commission:

#### Increase Salaries

1. Raise salaries for certificated professionals in every district and on every step of the pay scale to close the gap between Maryland's average teacher salary and Massachusetts' average teacher salary by the end of the Kirwan phase-in.
2. Enact a regionally-indexed living wage law for school employees that sets a family-supporting minimum salary.

#### Increase Staff

3. Reduce the statewide students-to-teacher ratio from 14.6 to 12.5 (average of three comparison states) by the end of the Kirwan phase-in by increasing instructional staff to give teachers more planning, training, and collaboration time; ensure students have access to quality non-core subject instruction; and implement locally-developed career lattices that allow teachers to move up in the profession without moving out of the classroom.
4. Increase para-educators, especially to lessen the burden on special educators and elementary school teachers.

5. Increase mental health staff—including psychologists, school counselors, and social workers—to create industry-standard student-to-staff ratios.<sup>2</sup>

#### Address Poverty

6. All funding for staffing increases should be made available to schools in order of poverty concentration, with the highest-poverty schools receiving funding for additional staff first.
7. Build community schools into the new funding formula in a way that significantly increases the number of high-poverty schools utilizing the model. The formula should feature a sliding scale of aid based on the number of schools with high percentages of low-income students.
8. Expand the use of prevention and intervention supports, such as restorative practices, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and trauma-informed instruction through increased staff and ongoing job-embedded professional development for all educators that is linked to new local discipline policies.
9. Adopt statewide social and emotional learning standards for all students, with a gradual phase-in of necessary professional development, changes to educator preparation programs, curriculum and learning materials, and teacher-developed assessment tools.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The implementation of Thornton catapulted Maryland to a leading position among states, becoming a model for high quality k-12 public education. But as we've seen, the formula has not kept up with a changing student body and increased poverty, with growing state and federal mandates, and with adequately supporting the professionals charged with one of the most important constitutional obligations in this state, that of providing a "thorough and efficient system of free public schools."

This commission has the opportunity to change that. If there is one thing I've learned in my time in education, it's that the practitioners in our classrooms and schools everyday know what works and what their students need. I am confident that the priorities of Maryland's educators as outlined here can dramatically improve our public schools, elevate the education profession, and most importantly, help Maryland better educate our next generation.

Thank you for the work you are leading and ensuring that educator voice is a part of your deliberations and final work product.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Betty Weller".

Betty Weller, MSEA President

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<sup>2</sup> Recommended school counselor ratios (and where Maryland ranks) can be found at [www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/Ratios13-14.pdf](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/Ratios13-14.pdf) (Accessed on October 11, 2017).

Recommended school social worker ratios can be found at <http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.sswaa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/Ratio%20Resolution%20StatementRev.pdf> (Accessed on October 11, 2017).

Recommended school psychologist ratios can be found at [www.nasponline.org/x27124.xml](http://www.nasponline.org/x27124.xml) (Accessed on October 11, 2017).