



Sept 23, 2019

Dr. William E. 'Brit' Kirwan
Chair, Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education
Blueprint for Maryland's Future Funding Formula Workgroup
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Dr. Kirwan,

In order to support the mission of the Kirwan Commission and Blueprint Workgroup in creating a more equitable public education system in Maryland, we, the undersigned organizations, submit this letter outlining our positions and concerns regarding the current recommendations. Our groups convened with a shared commitment to ensure that each recommendation can be implemented to support the Commission's goals for the future. We appreciate the considerable analyses conducted thus far and ask that you consider the following ways that the framework can be bolstered. Our solutions consider the racially equitable impact on schools across the state, prioritizing both marginally served and historically under-resourced communities.

The key issues addressed in this letter include: wealth equity, addressing the narrow definition of high needs populations, the scope of recommendations to best serve these populations, improving governance and accountability, attracting and retaining diverse and high quality teachers in low-resourced districts, and strengthening the community school model. Our specific concerns and proposals, while not exhaustive, represent areas where gaps in the plan would have a substantial negative impact on marginalized students in all jurisdictions.

Summary of Concerns and Proposed Solutions

An Open and Transparent Process: We strongly urge for open sessions to assure that the public is fully informed on the modeling/costing out process. Underlying our concerns is the use of the base model as reference for funding reform. We would like the Commission to make explicit in public meetings how the base funding model reflects the realities of our state, as this implicates the analysis of wealth equity, student-counts and modeling cost.

Timeline: We strongly encourage you to avoid any decisions that would extend the timeline and further delay these desperately needed reforms. An eight-year timeline was successfully achieved under the 2002 reforms (and produced incremental increases in test scores during that time). In fact, we believe that a timeline between 8-10 years, coupled with a phase-in targeting vulnerable populations at several educational stages, not just prekindergarten, allows a wider range of students to have the earliest possible benefit.

Wealth Equity and Equitable Local Contributions: As this group grapples with the challenges of assessing state and local wealth, balancing property and income and reconciling the range of local taxation practices, we emphasize the importance of the equity goals and this body's commitment to level "the playing field for students, regardless of income." The recent DLS presentations on tax capacity revealed very deep variations in terms of revenue generation and contribution. This greatly impacts the state's ability to serve all of its residents. Most shocking, we learned that many jurisdictions with the lowest wealth consistently tax at the highest rates than high wealth jurisdictions. This is not equity. To ensure that the state can meet its duty to all Maryland students, regardless of their zip code, we recommend the removal of the property assessment caps, increasing the guaranteed tax base to 90 percent, and eliminating the funding formula floors.

Ensuring an accurate count to ensure adequate resources: Due to changes in how districts collect data to determine which students are low-income, many students are not being counted in schools' poverty data. The switch to using government assistance rolls as the primary means to identify the poor and working poor has led fewer families identified as living in poverty. Poverty measures are faltering as a result of official policies that raise eligibility requirements for poor and working poor families seeking access to government programs, and limit the time that families can stay in the programs. This problem is particularly pronounced among recent immigrant populations. This inaccurate collection of data leads to significant reductions in state and federal funds, and loss of funding opportunities for schools in areas of concentrated poverty. We urge the members of The Blueprint Workgroup to:

- Identify economically disadvantaged students through the use of a hybrid model that combines, but does not duplicate, families identified through the Direct Certification process and families identified through an annual alternative income declaration form; and/or
- Utilize a multiplier of 1.8 (reflecting the ratio of students eligible for free and reduced meals to the number of direct certification students) to ensure that students are accurately counted.

Adequacy and High Needs Populations

Addressing the narrow definition of high needs populations and the scope of recommendations to best serve these populations: To date, members have been asked to consider cost estimates as a lump sum of a few services but **have not** reviewed detailed programs and services associated with the base funding, as well as the services and programs assumed under each of the high-needs categories. This is essential for determining if the decisions will be adequate to cover costs, and will especially implicate wealth equity. *Further,* Under the Commission's current recommendations, the "at-promise" student population is limited to select sub-groups, consisting of the three weighted categories. We ask that the Commission broaden its definition to include: pregnant and parenting youth, youth in foster care, children of incarcerated parents, students experiencing homelessness and housing instability and LGBTQAI youth.

- All such students are vulnerable populations whose needs have a great impact on base and "model" funding. It is vital that the Commission not only broaden its definition of "high need" to accurately project services, but also that students qualifying under multiple categories be funded for each vulnerability. We recommend that the Blueprint Workgroup consider the intersection of student vulnerabilities when determining weights for different services.

6th-10th grade supports: The majority of the Commission's recommendations implicate Pre-K and Elementary age students, while policy area 3 focuses uniquely on support for post-10th grade students as

related to College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards and Career and Technical Education (CTE). While PreK-3rd curricula and CCR/CTE are important aspects of public education, the Commission has failed to account for necessary improvements to the health and supplemental educational support of students in the 6th-10th grade. The effective deprioritization of the 6th-10th student population will result in funding distribution that favors students who meet learning goals at the early stages of their education. To address these concerns, we recommend:

- Transitional Supplemental Instruction (TSI), currently prioritized for K-3rd students, should be extended to the 6th-10th students transitioning to high school curricula.
- Prioritize health and developmental needs of students within this age group through access to school-based health centers and robust sexual health education.

Accurate assessment of cost of special education: Typically, experts who have looked at what it costs to educate students with disabilities in Maryland have not looked at the cost of educating students in nonpublic schools—the separate special education schools that serve students with more intensive needs. The problem with leaving these students out of the mix is that the resulting cost estimate omits a segment of the population of students with disabilities. Further, because federal and state special education laws require that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment, leaving these students out of the calculation means that local school systems will not receive sufficient funds to provide the supports and services that might otherwise enable them to serve at least some of these students with significant disabilities in their communities.

We urge the Blueprint Workgroup to take the following steps to address each of the concerns of this section:

- Ensure that funding for programs and documented strategies originating from or targeting Workgroup 4 recommendations, must be tied to the weighted categories of funding rather than distributed in the base, which direct resources to less affected school communities.
- Avoid applying the theory of “double-counting” in this costing-out process because the formula is designed to compound funding based on the range of services required. Therefore, even if some students fall into one or several weighted categories, they receive funding associated with their category.
- Transparent costing-out of the need of each of the above-mentioned student populations so that the weight assigned to the compensatory aid funding is relevant to their needs.
- Provide specific recommendations for ELL and SPED populations to address the needs of increasing numbers of students served with these identifications across the state.

Teachers & Leaders

Achieving diverse, high quality teachers – Strategies for Recruitment and Retention: In struggling districts, with high teacher turnover, ensuring a high quality, diverse teaching force does not mean beginning with more barriers and tests for teachers. Efforts to weed out “poor” teachers translate to less supportive environments for teachers and more barriers for Black and Latino teachers. The current career ladder design, places emphasis on the goal of eventually reaching a Nationally Board-Certified teacher force despite minimal evidence of completion rates nor data on the impact NBC teachers have on school communities including graduation or test passage rates. Further, if the Blueprint Workgroup does not cost out addressing inadequate teaching conditions (lack of induction, mentoring, and supportive supervision; in addition to large class sizes, lack of time), this will actually prevent new hires from ever becoming highly effective before they opt to leave the profession. To address this concern, we would like to see:

- Use of models like the Urban Teachers model which includes raising the importance of authentic assessments including classroom observations and conducting lessons tied to their coursework/specific skills. This creates a culture of support and growth rather than punishment.

- Investment in para-educator and student-to-teacher pipelines, certification support for conditional teachers, an investment in HBCUs as a source for more diverse teachers, increased mentoring in high poverty schools that struggle to retain veteran teachers, and a shift away from standardized assessments for teachers.

State Accountability for Success

Supplement, not supplant: Although the required special education study is not due until December, 2019, the Commission recommended a placeholder amount of money to be distributed to local school systems to assist in covering the costs of special education, and the General Assembly’s 2018 legislation provided for additional funding during this interim period. The funding was intended to supplement the special education funds already received by local school systems, not to supplant it. However, most, if not all, local school systems have, in fact, supplanted their special education funds by moving money out of their special education budgets and then adding the Commission funds, instead of increasing their special education budgets. It is our recommendation that:

- In order to fund special education at the necessary level, it is critical that legislation during the 2020 session include a “supplement, not supplant” provision.

Guidance to Districts on Alignment of ESSA and Community Schools:

The Kirwan Commission’s recommendations for community schools rely on a service model for community schools rather than an organizing model. By focusing on building sustainable community capacity, an organizing model for community schools creates change in poor communities. Community schools should empower parents and community to change the systemic forces that continue to disadvantage them. Instead, the Commission’s expectation is that organizational partners and staff members will drive this work. This replicates the conventional top-down systems currently in place that have proven to fail poor and historically oppressed communities.

- There should be clear language to ensure that community school funding is supplemental and cannot supplant current funding streams.
- Community schools should establish Community Leadership Teams (CLT’s) made up of school leadership, teachers, parents, and community members, in which all parties are democratically elected rather than appointed by school or district leadership, and funding earmarked to train parent leaders.
- Reexamine the MSDE role so that oversight mechanisms reflect an organizing model.

In closing, this is not an exhaustive list of concerns and/or suggestions but these are several key concepts that will greatly expand and strengthen the impact of the Kirwan recommendations. We request an opportunity to meet to further discuss. Thank you for your review and consideration.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Maryland
 AFT Maryland
 Baltimore Teachers Union
 CASA
 Disability Rights Maryland
 NAACP State Conference

NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland
 Prince George’s County Education Association
 Prince George’s County Advocates for Better
 Schools
 Teachers Democracy Project