



Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director

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| BILL: | House Bill 1376 |
| TITLE: | Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – Requirements |
| DATE: | March 17, 2021 |
| POSITION: | Favorable with amendments |
| COMMITTEE: | Ways and Means |
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This bill requires the State Department of Education (MSDE) to establish a statewide universal learning management system on or before July 1, 2022; authorizes a county board of education to create a permanent virtual school or to transition a school to virtual learning on a temporary basis under certain circumstances; requires a county board to establish certain plans, methods, and processes for temporary and permanent virtual schools; requires the Department to expand computer and Internet security infrastructure for virtual education; etc.

The Public Schools Superintendents’ Association of Maryland (PSSAM) **supports HB 1376 with amendments.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has created many challenges in the delivery of public education. However, it has highlighted the value and potential of virtual learning. There is no doubt that virtual learning will continue as a component of public education, well past the end of this pandemic. As the state’s top educators, we embrace this new mode of learning and feel it is a welcome supplement to the high-quality education already provided in Maryland schools. We hope to have the opportunity to work collaboratively with MSDE and many other stakeholders, including teachers and students, to build a virtual option for Maryland public schools.

In order to preserve the highest quality public education in Maryland, we need to enter the world of virtual learning with a deliberate, methodical, and research-based approach. We need to create virtual school programs that ensure academic success for our students, and instills confidence for families knowing that their children will continue to receive the highest quality instruction. We also need to work collaboratively with public school teachers, giving them a meaningful role in the development of virtual schools and providing support for those who will work in such an environment. Too many states have moved to a system of virtual learning that embraces and encourages private entities to run virtual schools. While there may be a role for some outside collaboration with well-tested companies as we build these models, our public school teachers will be at the center of any new mode of learning. We also need to ensure that these schools are part of the public school system, not an exodus to private and non-public schools. A more formally developed virtual learning model is imminent.

One Voice, One Vision for Maryland’s Students

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There are several aspects to this bill that we embrace such as the teacher preparation program enhancements. However, this is an issue we believe would more appropriately be discussed and created via the Professional Standards and Teaching Education Board (PSTEB) whose primary function is to advise the State Board of Education on standards related to the certification of teachers; policies on the waiver of certification requirements; and *the approval of teacher education programs*.

This is a diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, superintendents, and university systems. They are the subject matter experts and we suggest the committee remove the prescriptive elements with regard to new teacher preparation curriculum and task PSTEB to work on these issues.

This bill requires a lot of new responsibilities for MSDE, especially the charge to create a statewide Learning Management System (LMS). We strongly object to a mandated system. We have made extraordinary investments in technology over the past year, including new and multiple Learning Management Systems. Many districts do use the same LMS, but there is no uniformity across the twenty-four local school systems (LSSs). This is not the time to change course and pivot to a statewide system.

We appreciate the largely permissive nature of this bill but many LSSs are already using the current law, which as written, ensures the authorization and operation of high-quality virtual schools. Some schools are up and running, others have pending applications before MSDE, and some are deep into the development of programs using the current law. Every system is going to have a virtual option next year; but we need to retain the ability to create these educational programs to meet and respond to our local priorities.

For the reasons stated above, PSSAM **support House Bill 1376 with amendments** addressing our concerns as described in this testimony. We look forward to working with the committee during their deliberations.