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Bill: HB 939 – Education - Student Education Grant Program - Established
Date: February 17, 2021
Position: Oppose
Committee: House Ways and Means Committee
Contact: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director

This legislation establishes the Student Education Grant Program in the State Department of Education to provide grants to eligible students to attend a nonpublic school if their local public school does not provide full in-person instruction, and has not instituted any restrictions on athletic activities.

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), representing all twenty-four local school superintendents, **opposes HB 939**.

This bill's primary purpose is to create a funding program to finance nonpublic schools at the expense of public-school students. This diversion of state revenue to finance private school student expenses constitutes a voucher-like program long opposed by PSSAM and public education advocates in Maryland and across the nation.

We recognize the sponsor's intention to create more opportunities for students if public schools are not fully in-person by next school year. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the delivery of public education and school systems and superintendents are working tirelessly to provide for a safe and healthy return for students and staff. This bill encourages and incentivizes students to withdraw from the public school system. We believe this would hamper our return-to-school efforts by creating another hurdle to overcome in such uncertain times.

Our opposition is not only based on the diversion of public funds to nonpublic schools. The twenty-four local school boards and superintendents are responsible for providing a high-quality education for close to 900,000 students and we take that charge very seriously. We believe public schools provide the best education for Maryland children and our school system ranks among the most successful in the nation. It is important to note that public schools provide effective educational programs for *all* students, including special education, English language learners, early childhood, and rigorous high school programs that are not always available in nonpublic schools. Additionally, unlike nonpublic and private schools, with the exception of nonpublic special education schools, Maryland public schools are held strictly accountable by local, State, and federal laws and regulations for matters such as teacher education and certification, academic standards, and anti-discrimination laws. Local superintendents fully recognize that strong accountability measures for students translate into important accountability for public dollars invested in our public schools.

PSSAM strongly opposes the establishment of a state government administered program to help finance private schools, and the precedent that could result if this legislation is successful. The financial needs of our public-school students must take priority over those who choose a nonpublic education.

For the reasons stated above, PSSAM **OPPOSES HB 939** and requests an **unfavorable** committee report.