



Bill would redirect student funds toward school of choice

PATRICK HAUF

Feb 16, 2021

After Maryland Democrats successfully pushed through a multi-billion dollar education reform bill last week, one Republican lawmaker has proposed pandemic-related education legislation of her own

HB0939, introduced by Del. Lauren Arikan, R-Harford and Baltimore counties, would, under the condition that a school district fails to open in-person instruction by the fall, give parents the option to reallocate the public school funds of their child toward an alternative school.

Arikan told the Capital News Service she has heard many concerning stories in parenting and education groups online about the devastating impact of virtual schooling on students.

“I was inspired by the daily heartbreaking posts I was seeing,” she told CNS. “Children who weren’t even able to read yet being expected to navigate computer programs. ... And children with all different types of learning styles crying as they sat at the computer day after day.”

The funds would come through a grant program overseen by the Maryland Department of Education that parents could apply to.

The state’s Department of Education did not respond for comment on the feasibility of the potential program.

No additional state money would be spent, as the funds going toward the alternative school would be reallocated from the per-pupil spending of the public school the student attends.

Per-pupil funding in Maryland is roughly \$16,000, according to the Maryland Association of Counties, and would only cover a portion of most private schooling costs. A total of 22 of the 24 school districts have submitted plans to reopen for in-person instruction of some capacity by March 1, according to Gov. Larry Hogan.

Although, Arikan said, there is still some concern as to whether the state’s teachers union will cooperate with the districts to effectively reopen.

Arikan’s bill draws many similarities to some other pandemic-inspired school choice legislation across the country.

A Utah lawmaker, in an effort to ensure schools follow reopening plans for February, proposed a bill that would allow a portion of per-pupil funding from a school district to be reallocated to a private school of choice. Lawmakers have not yet voted on this bill.

In Illinois, a lawmaker proposed a bill that would provide a voucher to families who took their child out of the public school system due to ongoing virtual learning that is equivalent to the per-pupil spending — be that for private schooling or homeschooling. That bill is yet to be voted on.

A Georgia bill reallocates per-pupil spending into a state fund that pays for private schooling and homeschooling for those who want to leave the public schools due to virtual learning. That bill is also yet to be voted on.

Criticism of these voucher-related school choice programs, often coming from teacher unions, oppose the idea of taking away the per-pupil funds of public schools and giving it to private schools.

The Maryland State Education Association declined to comment on the bill to CNS.

Corey DeAngelis, director of school choice at the Libertarian Reason Foundation and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, told CNS that school choice policies like Arian's bill are resonating more with parents amid the pandemic for good reason, but should be established regardless of whether instruction is virtual or in-person.

DeAngelis emphasized the importance of competition within the school system to ensure the best education options are being pursued.

“Private schools have been fighting to reopen, but so many teachers unions have been fighting to remain closed,” he told CNS. “The difference is one of incentives. One of these sectors gets your money regardless of how well they meet the needs of their customers, and in this case, regardless of whether they even open their doors for business.”

A number of different surveys have shown rising support for different school choice policies nationwide, according to EdChoice.org.

Although, these policies are mostly supported by Republican legislators at the state level across the country.

Hogan has emphasized his support for school choice during his time as governor, issuing a proclamation declaring January 24-30 as Maryland school choice week.

Hogan also lit the Maryland Government House red in January to display his support of school choice policy.

The bill is scheduled for a hearing in the Ways and Means committee at 1:30 Wednesday.

Microsoft may earn an Affiliate Commission if you purchase something through recommended links in this article.