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MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY JOINT REPUBLICAN CAUCUS

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House and Senate Republicans Fight for Students Left Behind *Provide education choices to Maryland's vulnerable students*

Annapolis, Md – Today, the Joint Republican Caucus announced legislation and other efforts to provide education choices to Maryland's vulnerable students. All Maryland children deserve a world-class education and parents should have the opportunity to choose the best educational opportunity for their children, regardless of their financial circumstances or zip code.

"Our members were deeply disappointed that Governor's FY24 Budget included a 20% reduction (\$2 million) in funding for the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today or BOOST Program," said Senate Minority Leader Steve Hershey.

The BOOST program provides scholarships to low-income and at-risk youth to attend a non-public school. The \$10 million BOOST program amounts to just 0.11% of Maryland's \$8.8 BILLION public schools' budget.

In addition to the cut in critical funding, the General Assembly has started phasing out the BOOST program through obscure budget language rather than through the legislative process, limiting the ways that impacted families can make their voices heard.

According to the latest BOOST report in January, during the 2012-2022 School Year:

- 3,268 students received scholarships
- The average household income of BOOST families was just \$35,488
- 100% of students qualified for free and reduced meals
- 56% were students of color
- 1,030 were English language learners
- 247 were Special Education Students
- Students came from 21 of 23 counties and Baltimore City

"If the Governor and General Assembly want to eliminate the program, they should do so in a transparent manner that allows for public comment and participation," continued Hershey. "Unfortunately, hiding behind budget language and automatic tax increases is becoming the norm in Annapolis, which is disingenuous and a disservice to the people we serve."

Senate and House Republicans are committed to fully-funding BOOST for FY24 and will use the new opportunities through Question 1 to restore the \$2 million in cuts.

Additionally, we have introduced [HB 737 - The Right to Learn Act](#) .

The Right to Learn Act codifies, fully-funds, and stops the phase-out of the BOOST program, providing scholarships for low-income families to send their children to approved private and parochial schools.

The Right to Learn Act also allows families of students trapped in failing schools to seek other education options for their children. Under the bill, a failing school is defined as a Maryland School Report Card score of two stars or less for two consecutive years. Those who elect to seek alternative options would receive the per-pupil spending equivalent in an Education Savings Account from which they could fund qualified education expenses such as tuition for a public school in another jurisdiction, a private or parochial school, or a homeschooling curriculum.

“School choice already exists in Maryland, but only wealthy parents get to make that choice,” said the bill’s lead sponsor, Delegate Jeff Ghrist. “If we are going to end childhood poverty in Maryland, we have to give the children living in poverty more lifelines when it comes to their futures. The BOOST program is such a lifeline for these families.”

The most powerful special interest group in the state, the teacher’s union, has lobbied heavily against BOOST families, somehow suggesting that the comparative 0.11% in funding is some danger to existence of public schools. BOOST families are working hard to guarantee their children’s right to a quality education.

“Every child has a unique learning style, and by creating more options and opportunities through BOOST, the needs of these children are met,” said Nefertari Lee, BOOST Coalition Parent Coordinator. “We need good public schools, but we also need good supplemental options provided through the BOOST scholarship.”

“[Like] any other parent, I look for the best educational opportunities for my children. I work a full-time job to support my family and my struggles are real, but the BOOST program has opened the door for my daughter and so many other kids to get an education that offers a support system village,” said Ana Carvajal, whose daughter is a BOOST recipient. “We are actively doing our best at home to teach and raise our kids to be kind, good, and productive members of society. We need your help in making our noble efforts go even further, the Boost program is essential in helping so many families achieve their educational goals for their children.”

“At the age of 40 I obtained my Masters Degree. I decided long ago that I was going to work hard to make sure that I can give my younger children [with learning disabilities] what they need to be successful. Unfortunately, I still receive section 8, SNAP benefits, daycare vouchers and medical assistance. BOOST has provided me the opportunity to give my children the education that they deserve and that I strived for. Both of my children were falling through the cracks in the public school. Private school has given my children a sense of hope. There is no other way that my children would have this opportunity if it weren’t for BOOST assistance,” said Candi Gilbert whose children attend Broadfording Christian Academy in Hagerstown through the BOOST scholarship program.

Parents of children in failing schools are also supporting the Right to Learn Act.

“I am the parent of two children who attend Johnston Square Elementary School - one of the twenty-three schools where it was recently revealed that zero students were performing at proficient levels in math,” said Nichelle Watkins. “I have been concerned that my son was not receiving an adequate education since my son was well into his first grade year. I am also concerned that with the lack of adequate resources, children in the Public School System will never receive a fair, quality education. Without an adequate education and with the strength of the streets in Baltimore, my son does not stand a chance of having the ability to survive in life. My son is a young black boy and his education to me, is a matter of life or death. This bill would allow me, a single mother who is extremely concerned about my children’s education, to invest the resources allotted for them in a place where I can rest assured they are receiving a great education.”

“The testimony from these families is incredibly impactful,” said House Minority Leader Jason Buckel. “They want their children to have bright futures, and they know how vital a quality education is in realizing that goal. We cannot leave them behind. In his inaugural address, Governor Moore said we must refuse to accept the false choice that in order for one side to win, others must lose. That is a powerful statement, and it is one I happen to agree with. Children in classrooms today are losing because the General Assembly has repeatedly chosen to make the teacher’s union the winner while students in failing schools lose. We hear a great deal about the school-to-prison pipeline. I believe what we really have is a *failing school-to-prison* pipeline. Schools are not meeting their needs and children are graduating without the tools they need to be contributing members of society. We can, and we must, do better.”

In addition to the Right to Learn Act, Senate and House Republicans are also proposing the following Education bills this Session.

[SB 522 - Education - Accountability and Implementation Board - Membership](#)

[HB 738 - School Safety Enhancement Act](#)

[HB 739 – Truancy Act of 2023](#)

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