



November 2, 2023

The Honorable Wes Moore
Governor of Maryland
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable William Ferguson
President, MD State Senate
H-107 State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Adrienne Jones
Speaker, MD House of Delegates
H-101, State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: The Blueprint for Maryland's Future

Dear Governor Moore, President Ferguson, and Speaker Jones:

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) writes to provide perspective on behalf of Maryland's 24 county governments on the continued challenges of implementing the Blueprint for Maryland's Future ("The Blueprint") and to seek guidance on how to proceed. Counties are grateful for the State's strong partnership on education, willingness to work with county governments, and thoughtful consideration of county concerns as they implement the Blueprint. Counties hope that this level of collaboration continues to deepen and that the Administration supports greater flexibility for county governments to deliver Blueprint reforms.

Counties want to be clear about their intentions and the situation in which they find themselves. County concerns should not be misconstrued to suggest they want to relitigate any of the landmark law's objectives or values. Instead, the requests outlined in this letter better position county governments to effectively execute those very intents, objectives, and values in ways that best suit each jurisdiction's diverse abilities and strengths.

In many ways, the Blueprint applies a one-size-fits-all approach to education investment and implementation that does not account for our state's diverse local government capacities, processes, and abilities. As we move deeper into implementation, the diverse systems, constraints, and structures counties must work within become more apparent, especially financially.

The collective County Administrations continue to work extensively on evaluating and planning for future costs relating to the Blueprint. The local levels of funding for education in each respective jurisdiction have reached record levels in recent years. However, this record county funding, combined with greater funding requirements mandated by the law, will limit counties' ability to fund competing governmental needs at basic operational levels. This can potentially threaten Blueprint implementation and the funding and stability of critical local government services, like public safety and emergency management, public health and social services, transportation infrastructure, libraries, and community colleges. To be clear, no county government wants to choose between funding education or safety, human services, and infrastructure.

Additionally, transparency in education spending remains an ongoing systemic challenge. Even with a record level of funding directed to Local Education Agencies, counties have few means of ensuring the dollars invested are spent on intended measures. Local Boards of Education are separately elected government bodies; county governments exist as funding partners with no oversight, unable to assure constituents that the Blueprint is being implemented as intended.

Counties cannot responsibly budget and support the Blueprint without a comprehensive understanding of school finances, including the availability and allocation of federal, state, and county funds. While the level of spending transparency and accountability varies between school systems and county governments, there is an overarching concern that the default requirements result in counties receiving little-to-no spending specifics and vague budget requests. Moreover, counties assert that more clarity will ensure fair negotiation practices and build public trust in our governmental and educational institutions.

To best ensure the successful implementation of the Blueprint, counties respectfully seek the following:

Education Funding Clarity and Accountability

- **A more comprehensive cost analysis from the State.**
Counties seek a comprehensive analysis – provided by the State – on what's expected for county share. Currently, counties rely on their local Boards of Education and their understanding of the law in this matter, which can vary and lead to mistakes or misinterpretation. Having this analysis from the State will create a smoother and more effective process at both the local and state levels. Additionally, many associated costs were excluded from the stated \$32 billion Blueprint estimate over 10 years, including but not limited to the cost of pre-k classroom space, CTE classroom modifications, career ladder implementation costs, out-of-classroom time for teachers, and additional staffing support for special education and English learners. Furthermore, these concerns should all be considered through the lens of fluctuating school enrollment and counties' varied experiences with increasing, decreasing, and stagnant enrollment.
- **Revisit dual enrollment funding and responsibilities.**
Counties recommend that the State clarify expected funding requirements, the state/local split required to pay for dual enrollment students, and the role of the various funding systems (State, counties, and community colleges). This clarity is especially needed for programs outside of the regular school year calendar (like those during Summer and Winter). Additionally, counties request that the State clarify if and how school systems can cap the number of dual enrollment students and/or community college courses a student can take in one year's period and how funding accounts for a capped scenario.
- **Clearer guidance and analysis of how schools are spending Blueprint funding, especially State Aid meant to supplement local funding levels.**
State Aid is received by local Boards of Education as unrestricted, making it tough to evaluate whether these funds are being maximized. MACo understands that there are several moving parts to tackling this problem. Counties welcome the Maryland State Department of Education's

(MSDE) forthcoming financial management system and student data system capable of tracking and analyzing the requirements of §5-234 of the Education Article. However, it is MACo's understanding that the implementation and launch of the system is highly delayed – indefinitely, and long past its July 1, 2023, deadline. Furthermore, there is no regulatory or legal affirmation that county governments are to be among the authorities to expeditiously receive the spending data reported to the system.

Pre-Kindergarten Expansion

- **Easing of the certification/EXCELS requirements and family childcare scholarships to encourage private provider participation.**

Current financial and time constraints for private pre-K providers make it difficult for operators of small businesses to meet the requirements for certification and enter public pre-K. For example, MSDE's pre-K expansion grants and childcare scholarships for families require that providers participate in the EXCELS program (the pre-K expansion grant requires the provider to meet a minimum EXCELS level of 3 with a plan to reach level 5 within 5 years). These constraints are proving to block otherwise eligible providers from entering the market. Providers who meet licensure requirements should also be immediately eligible to provide private pre-K seats to meet the mixed delivery system requirements of the Blueprint. Lastly, counties request greater State partnership in the form of capital and technical aid should private providers not enter the pre-K market as expected.

- **Greater flexibility to approve and use pre-K facilities.**

There needs to be greater flexibility in the approval of pre-K spaces. Using available space in publicly funded community/recreation centers, colleges, libraries, or leased space, is not currently an option under the Blueprint law due to additional on-site requirements like the presence of a school administrator, front desk person, and on-duty nurse.

- **Increased State aid to renovate and construct pre-K facilities.**

Counties request greater State partnership in the form of capital and technical aid to support counties and school systems in making facility adjustments (renovations or additions) or new construction to accommodate the expanding pre-K facilities.

Educator Hiring and Retention

- **Alternative and/or expedited certification for teachers.**

Maryland is not immune to the national teacher shortage. The current system of teacher certification simply will not meet the Blueprint's requirements for more teachers. The State needs to consider best practices for expedited or alternative certification without lessening the standard for high-quality teachers.

- **More time for career ladder models to be developed.**

The Blueprint's adjustments to the educator career ladder are among the most unpredictable of the

Blueprint costs and expected investments. This is partially due to many variables, including teachers' opt-in rates, educator compensation (which will be subject to union negotiations), and additional staffing needed to cover their time out of the classroom. To better stabilize this great variable, the State may want to consider the following: removing the requirement that principals are National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) by 2029 so that we don't unintentionally create a leadership shortage and consider changing the NBCT incentives to attract certified teachers to the schools with the greatest needs. Currently, the Blueprint offers NBCT incentives of \$10,000 for certification and an additional \$7,000 for NBCT teachers working in low performing schools. Counties suggest flipping that incentive structure to instead offer \$7,000 incentives for NBCTs and an additional \$10,000 for those working in low-performing schools.

- **Consideration and guidance on the unknown long-term effects of salary compression for school staff as a result of minimum educator salaries and the career ladder.**

Counties are concerned with the potentially significant impacts of salary compression and schoolhouse disjunction as unintended consequences of the Blueprint's mandated minimum educator salaries. Additionally, county governments are concerned with the impact this may have on collective bargaining and seek reasonable assurance that local bargaining entities will negotiate in good faith with the funding formulas as they are put forward, especially in relation to salaries and benefits.

Implementing the Blueprint for Maryland's Future is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform Maryland into a world-class model for education. Counties request the State's support and help to advance these points and to make the Blueprint work for all stakeholders with equity, fidelity, and transparency.

MACo welcomes further discussion of the concerns outlined in this letter and any other considerations the State deems essential to making the Blueprint successful. Please do not hesitate to contact MACo Associate Policy Director Brianna January at bjanuary@mdcounties.org or 410.269.0043.

Respectfully,



Calvin Ball
President, MACo
County Executive, Howard County



Michael Sanderson
Executive Director, MACo

CC: Chief Elected Officials of Maryland's 24 County Governments