



Maryland Education Coalition



INSPIRES ACTION & POSITIVE CHANGE SO MARYLAND'S STUDENTS SUCCEED

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Via Electronic Mail

Karen Salmon, Ed.D.
State Superintendent
Maryland State Department of Education
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Re: Equity Principles to Anchor Return/Recovery Plan

Dear Dr. Salmon:

Events of the past four months have laid bare a number of truths, some perhaps inconvenient, about the state of education in Maryland. Distance learning has revealed the extent of the digital divide as well as the difficulty of consistently engaging many students with disabilities, students who are homeless, students whose first language is not English and others in online learning. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others have forced many to confront, some for the first time, the racism inherent in the structures of American society, including the education system. The veto of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future creates the likelihood that, unless overridden, the funding structure for education in Maryland will remain problematic, the achievement gaps identified by MSDE itself will not only continue but will grow larger, and vulnerable students will, as they always have, pay the price. However, as is often the case, challenges also present opportunities. Amidst the confusion and chaos, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and local school systems have an opportunity to reshape what education looks like for all students and to engage in that process in a way that puts equity squarely at the center of the rebuilding process.

The Maryland Education Coalition (MEC), joined by a broad-based group of additional signatories, remains concerned, however, that so far, MSDE has not seized this opportunity. Although the July 16, 2020 Stakeholder group meeting addressed scenario planning with equity issues in mind, local school systems are already well along in their recovery/return planning efforts, and MSDE's "Maryland Together: Maryland's Recovery Plan for Education," fails to provide a strong foundation of equity upon which the local school systems can build their plans. The plan simply requires local school systems to develop their plans with equity in mind and references COMAR 13A.01.06, the 2019 equity regulations; the document will do little to prevent the current wave of crises from widening existing gaps in education outcomes into unbridgeable chasms. As it stands, "Maryland Together" is an invitation to local school systems to talk about equity without actually providing equity. MSDE should rise to the demands of this moment by announcing clear principles of equity and requiring local school systems to adhere to them. Although local school systems must, of course, retain the autonomy to determine how to implement these principles in accordance with the strengths and needs of their students, families and staff, it is essential that the State provide the framework.

We urge MSDE to adopt the following principles in its plan and require the local school systems to expressly incorporate them into their local return/recovery plans, specifying how the school system will address each principle under each model of education under consideration, whether all distance learning, a hybrid model of distance and in-person, or all in-person:

- 1) Solicit and include input on district level return/recovery plan from students, parents and organizations representing homeless students, low-income students, English learners and their families, students with disabilities, and students and families facing elevated health risks because of COVID-19, and ensure that the plan identifies strategies to support these groups in accordance with the input received.
- 2) Conduct an academic assessment of each student at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year and, for any student who has experienced learning loss, provide additional instruction, tutoring or other academic supports to help the student reach grade level. With respect to students with disabilities, this should include the provision of different or additional special education services and/or compensatory education and related services if required to address regression or failure to make progress towards IEP goals.
- 3) Until schools return to a fully in-person instructional model, prioritize students who did not successfully participate in distance learning during the spring of 2020 and students who are unlikely to be successful with distance learning during the 2020-21 school year for in-person learning opportunities offered by the school system.
- 4) Assess and meet each student's need for wraparound supports including food, access to healthcare, assistance securing public benefits, child care (including for periods of distance learning), and job training and placement for caregivers, including through partnerships with community organizations and agencies.
- 5) Develop and implement a plan for a restorative approach that fosters positive relationships among students, staff and parents, educates staff on childhood trauma and how to identify and address student's social-emotional needs and teaches social-emotional skills, provides mental health services to students who require them, and eliminates the use of disciplinary exclusion as a response to behavior challenges.
- 6) Develop a standardized system for tracking accurate contact information, attendance, participation and engagement in distance learning sessions, and continuously assess student engagement in both distance and in-person learning to rapidly identify, connect with, and support students at risk of or not making academic progress.
- 7) Assess the need and provide electronic devices, software, internet, and IT and computer literacy support for each student and caretaker as needed for distance learning and homework.
- 8) Ensure access to grade level curriculum for all students with the provision of needed supports and assistance.
- 9) Ensure that all aspects of the return to school meet health and safety standards to minimize risk to students and their families and to school staff, while ensuring that no group of students is denied services. This includes, but is not limited to, ensuring the safety of all forms of transportation by which students get to and from school, classroom layout, determining how to facilitate participation by students with and without disabilities in activities together when traditional inclusive activities may be restricted, and making individualized decisions with families about whether students are able to return to school.
- 10) Provide teachers and other school staff with the training, mentorship, planning time and support they need to meet the needs of students in accordance with these equity principles.

We firmly believe that these principles offer the pillars upon which a more equitable education system can be constructed. Other states already have shown leadership in these areas in their respective recovery plans.

For example:

*Minnesota, Oregon and Washington’s plans define “equity” in public education as the result of a transformative process in which schools acknowledge that their historical and present policies and practices have disadvantaged certain student groups and invest resources in repairing the harm done. The plans specifically identify those students who have faced oppression and suffer disproportionate harm related to COVID-19: Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian students, students with disabilities, immigrant and migrant students, homeless students, students in foster care, English Language Learners, LGBTQIA students, and students living in poverty.

*Minnesota’s plan articulates the specific actions school districts should take to support homeless students, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Arizona and Virginia’s plans call on school districts to dramatically reduce or eliminate the use of out-of-school suspension to avoid exacerbating the damage resulting from months-long school closures.

*New Jersey and Virginia’s plans outline concrete actions school districts must take to adopt a trauma-informed approach to re-engage students that prioritizes and supports social-emotional learning and well-being.

*Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, and Virginia’s plans set forth strategies by which districts can identify students who suffered the greatest learning loss and support those students to enable them to access grade-level curriculum.

*Minnesota and New Jersey’s plans direct school districts to bridge the digital divide by ensuring technology access for students who do not have it, and by prioritizing limited in-person learning opportunities for students who cannot participate meaningfully in distance learning.

*Rhode Island’s plan goes beyond offering guidance to school districts, directing them to “provide assurance” or “submit evidence” that they have met critical benchmarks, including in the areas of identifying and supporting vulnerable students, repairing learning loss, and supporting student mental health.

Although no state plan is perfect, many are far stronger than the document developed by MSDE. If Maryland expects to place its students on equal footing with their peers around the nation, it must offer them more.

We recognize that building an equitable education system will require a significant investment and believe that the Blueprint legislation—legislation that came out of work you did as a member of the Kirwan Commission--would have given Maryland the opportunity to begin this process. Whether or not the Blueprint eventually becomes law, Maryland must find a way to redirect revenue to meet the pressing needs of those students whom our education system has traditionally left behind and has now pushed to the brink.

We urge you to make “Maryland Together: Maryland’s Recovery Plan for Education” truly a model for the nation by incorporating these equity principles and, as always, stand ready to work with you to make education truly equitable for every child in Maryland.

Thank you for your consideration of this letter.

Sincerely,

Rick Tyler, Jr., Chair

Maryland Education Coalition (MEC)

cc: Carol A. Williamson, Ed.D.; Sylvia A. Lawson, Ph.D.; Mary Gable
Maryland State Board of Education

MEC Member Organizations or Individuals (* MSDE Recovery Plan Stakeholders)

- ACLU of Maryland
- Advocates for Children and Youth
- Arts Education in Maryland Schools
- Arts Every Day
- Attendance Works
- CASA
- Decoding Dyslexia of Maryland
- Disability Rights Maryland *
- League of Women Voters of Maryland
- Let Them See Clearly
- Maryland Coalition for Community Schools
- Maryland Out of School Time Network
- Maryland PTA *
- Maryland State Conference-NAACP *
- Parent Advocacy Consortium
- Public Justice Center
- Right to Read MD
- School Social Workers of MD
- Dave Hornbeck
- Kalman (Buzzy) R. Hettleman
- Sharon Rubinstein

Additional Organizations or Individuals Signatories

- Abilities Network
- ABCs for Life Success
- Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint
- Atlantic Seaboard Dyslexia Education Center
- Bright Futures, LLC
- Decaro Doran Siciliano Gallagher and DeBlasis, LLP
- Education Advocacy Coalition
- Education Due Process Solutions, LLC
- Holly Parker, Esq.
- Howard County Autism Society
- Janna Parker
- Law Offices of Brian K. Gruber, P.A.
- Law Offices of Ellen A. Callegary, P.A.
- Law Offices of Mark B. Martin, P.A.
- Law Office of Nicole Joseph
- Learning Disabilities Association of Maryland
- Linda Barton, MSED
- Loud Voices Together
- Maria Ott
- Maryland Coalition of Families
- Maryland Special Education Lawyers
- McDonough Law
- Parents' Place of Maryland *
- Pathfinders for Autism
- Positive School Center
- Project HEAL at Kennedy Krieger Institute
- Savit & Szymkowicz
- Schweitzer & Scherer, LLC
- Selene Almazan Law, LLC
- Special Kids Company
- Steedman Law Group, LLC
- Weinfeld Education Company
- Youth, Education, Justice Clinic – University of Maryland, Francis Carey School of Law