



PSSAM Legislative and Policy Recommendations The Blueprint for Maryland's Future

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future creates a bold trajectory for Maryland's public education system. As the state's top educators, we stand behind the Blueprint and applaud those who have fought hard to make this vision a reality.

We have gained invaluable experience and insight after three years of implementation - celebrating early successes, but also experiencing frustrations and challenges. Our requests for policy and legislative changes are the result of the real experiences from education experts doing the Blueprint "work" every day in school buildings and leadership offices. Our experiences in education reform have taught us that it is not enough to put a program in place, but to evaluate its effectiveness and make adjustments along the way.

The Blueprint's goals are achievable, but the implementation needs to be streamlined and realistic with clearer expectations and guidance from State leaders. While it is too early for a complete evaluation of our work, we believe these valuable lessons should be considered, and our recommendations for changes embraced as "course corrections" to ensure long-term success.

This document includes requests for policy adjustments we believe can be made by the State Board of Education (SBOE) and/or the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) without statutory changes, or within the AIB's plenary authority.

Part of the Blueprint's innovative approach is that every Pillar is transformative; but, it is the coalescence of these five Pillars that will create dynamic outcomes and achievements. In practice, it is also this coalescence that has been one of the biggest challenges to successful implementation. In addition, each of Maryland's twenty-four Local Education Agencies (LEAs) has a different starting point and growth trajectory. The Blueprint tends to have a one-size approach that does not "fit all," especially in districts that were previously demonstrating efficiency and excellence in many areas of the Blueprint.

Our Core Mission and Measure of Success - Student Growth and Achievement

The recommendations in these pages are the result of analysis of student data, qualitative experiences of educators and staff, and thoughtful contemplation of the following questions:

- How is this pillar/activity/initiative performing against ***Our Core Mission and Measure of Success - Student Growth and Achievement?***

- What has been accomplished that enhances and promotes *student achievement*?
 - What is new, or enhanced that has *worked*?
 - How have we demonstrated *progress*?
- What has challenged our ability to grow *student success*?
- What has been our ‘*Return on Investment (ROI?)*’ on each activity?
 - Has the human and fiscal capital produced *results* that would have otherwise been unattainable?
 - Will further investments in an initiative achieve *student success*?

PSSAM, and its twenty-four superintendents, look forward to working with the State Board and AIB leadership, the Governor, the Legislature, and all education partners to guarantee the success of The Blueprint, ensuring a world-class and equitable public education for every Maryland student. For more information, please contact Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, at marypat.fannon@pssam.org.

This document is organized by Blueprint Pillar, numbered for ease of reference, and color coded to signify PSSAM’s priorities (High; Medium; Low)

Pillar 1 - Early Childhood Education

successes!

There are now more than 31,378 students enrolled in publicly funded full-day pre-K programs, roughly 21% of Maryland’s 3 and 4 year olds. Also, according to the AIB, the number of Judy Centers has increased from 53 to 86 since school year (SY) 20-21. Highlights from local school systems include Charles County that has almost doubled Pre-K enrollment since the 21-22 SY. Queen Anne’s has used a three-year plan to expand full-day Pre-K for Tier 1 four-year-olds utilizing the PreK Expansion grant to allow for the expansion costs.

We propose to maintain the Blueprint’s vision of a *mixed delivery PreK system* by creating clearer distinctions and expectations, between the public and private providers.

1. ***For LEA programs - focus public school expansion on Tier I four-year-olds*** for the next four years or until there is reliable data demonstrating that a critical mass of interested families are being served. This does not preclude public schools from serving all families, but removes the mandate that we keep expanding beyond Tier I; however, programs serving students outside of Tier I would not receive State funding. This allows LEAs autonomy in expansion decisions based on capacity, demand, and funding. ***This would also create a stronger business model for private providers to serve Tier I three-year-olds, as well all non-Tier I three and four-year olds*** and give MSDE flexibility to create targeted incentives for these unique providers (*legislation required*).

2. ***Remove the required participation percentage for the mixed delivery system and permanently shift the responsibility of supporting and cultivating private providers to MSDE.*** Public school systems are not equipped to develop educational programming or ensure profitable business models for private providers. Where appropriate, LEAs can be partners in elevating child development pedagogy and in referring families to available providers. The public school system was built to educate students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The forced relationship between public and private providers needs to be removed from the statute. Cultivating and supporting private providers should be a local decision dependent on capacity, not a mandated extension of the delivery of public education (*legislation required*).
3. ***Clarify that students experiencing homelessness, multilingual learners, and special education students are considered Tier I for funding purposes indefinitely (legislation required, or more affirmative policy guidance from the State Board of Education and the Accountability and Board, hereinafter referred to as “the Boards”).***
4. ***PreK Expansion Grant - allow for a portion of the Grant to be used to achieve an EXCELS rating.*** Currently, programs without an EXCELS rating self-fund until they receive an EXCELS rating; allowing "conditional" public programs to tap into this grant would accelerate the creation of available seats. ***In addition, opening the application process sooner*** would be hugely advantageous to all users since it would align more naturally with family decisions for fall enrollment (*requested SBOE policy change*).
5. ***Accreditation for PreK Teachers and Programs - we propose the Department reduce the pressure on PreK teachers and programs to complete two different accreditations (MSDE and EXCELS). We support requiring MSDE approval within one year (and attached to funding), and then allow for EXCELS to either be optional, (perhaps with a financial incentive) or give LEAs three years to complete their first EXCELS.*** EXCELS is an exceptional standard, but it requires over 200 pages of documentation and presents an unequal credentialing burden on PreK teachers (*SBOE policy change*).

We further request ***clarification in writing that an EXCELS rating is ‘per school’ and not ‘per classroom’***. This documentation would alleviate confusion among the various divisions that engage in early childhood education at the Department and in the LEAs (*SBOE policy change*).
6. Formally request that the Interagency Commission on School Construction program (IAC) ***revise the educational specifications*** so future school construction and design includes space for ***PreK*** in elementary school buildings, as well as establishing education specifications for standalone PreK classroom spaces (*SBOE/AIB support*).

Pillar 2 - Highly Qualified and Diverse Teachers and Leaders

successes!

Every LEA is on track to provide a \$60,000 starting salary for teachers beginning in FY '27, with most already achieving this pivotal milestone. In addition, all teachers in Maryland received a 10% salary increase by July 2024 as part of the Blueprint's goals to retain teachers and elevate the teaching profession. Teachers pursuing National Board Certification (NBC) increased 39% in SY23-24, with 11 of 24 LEAs in the top 25 of the country in terms of numbers of individuals pursuing NBC. Maryland is first in the country for the number of new teachers earning NBC and has the second highest number of teachers of color earning NBC ([AIB Highlights](#)). Highlights from local school systems include Somerset, which currently does not have any Nationally Board Certified Teachers, but enrolled their first cohort of teachers last year.

To ensure the Blueprint for Maryland's Future achieves its intended goals, targeted refinements to the Career Ladder and certification provisions are essential. A clear and actionable path forward will not only strengthen the framework but also address longstanding challenges in its implementation.

7. ***Amend the statute to remove administrators on the Career Ladder*** - remove Assistant Principals (APs) and Principals from the career ladder provisions. This adjustment aligns with the established bargaining structures in school systems, where teachers and administrators are represented by separate units. Declassifying APs and Principals as "teachers" would exempt them from teaching time and National Board Certification (NBC) requirements, which are not appropriate benchmarks for their roles. If aspects of NBC are deemed valuable for school administrators, they should be integrated into licensure standards and formalized through regulations set by the State Board of Education (*legislation required*).

Career Ladder Elements for Fiscal 2026 (July 1, 2025)

Long-established budget and bargaining timelines require that LEAs negotiate contracts for fiscal 2026 beginning in the fall of 2025. At this time, there is no final guidance or adopted policy for these final elements of the career ladder to be implemented beginning July 1, 2025. This delay creates significant challenges and uncertainty for LEAs and their bargaining partners.

Adding to this complexity, it is widely anticipated that the Governor and Legislature will take budgetary and legislative actions that will affect the Blueprint's career ladder mandates. Despite the uncertainty, LEAs have proactively engaged in planning for the phase-in of these provisions through pilot programs and resource analyses.

8. Given this uncertain landscape, ***we urge the Boards to endorse a “pause” in our negotiations regarding outstanding career ladder elements until the conclusion of the 2025 legislative session and the passage of the FY 2026 State budget.*** While we hesitate to establish any formal role for the Boards in our labor negotiations, we believe it is necessary that State leaders decisively and explicitly inform LEAs and unions of expectations during this tenuous and uncertain State budget environment. The language below reflects our intended actions over the next several months as LEAs approach their bargaining partners to discuss next steps.

“With the support of the Maryland State Board of Education and the Accountability and Implementation Board, it is the intention of XXXX County Public Schools and its partner bargaining units to pause negotiations on any remaining career ladder elements required in The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future until the conclusion of the 2025 session of the Maryland General Assembly and the passage of the FY 2026 State budget.

The Governor and the Legislature will be facing an historic budget imbalance during the 2025 legislative session and much of this imbalance rests on the State’s future spending obligations for the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future.”

9. ***Suspend all submissions related to career ladder provisions, including the 8 year phase-in plans for 60/40, the implementation of PAR, and Level 4 of the career ladder until a clearer fiscal and policy landscape emerges.*** Once that clarity is achieved, we ask the Boards to actively collaborate with LEAs and labor partners to establish reasonable timelines for future submissions to ensure both the Blueprint statute and collective bargaining statutes are managed in a collaborative fashion. These timelines should align with State and local budget calendars and honor established bargaining processes (***requested joint SBOE/AIB policy***).

Addressing these issues will provide much-needed stability and enable LEAs to focus on meaningful planning and implementation in the best interests of students and staff.

10. ***Maintenance of Certification*** - we propose a measured approach to the maintenance of certification. To mitigate the financial and administrative burden of recertification, ***the Legislature should consider reducing the State’s contribution to \$4,000 every five years or maintaining the current \$8,000 reimbursement but extending the recertification period to ten years,*** as originally envisioned by the Kirwan Commission. It is important to note that some LEAs have already negotiated these provisions in good faith and are relying on State reimbursements. Therefore, ***any changes should apply prospectively*** to avoid disrupting existing agreements (***legislation required***).

11. **Study Narrative for the Blueprint's Interim Evaluation** - we urge the team conducting the interim evaluation to *explore critical questions related to the effectiveness of NBC in teacher recruitment and student achievement*. Specifically, we recommend examining:
- The relationship between incentives and teacher recruitment with a focus on low performing schools;
 - The relationship between NBC certification and student achievement outcomes;
 - The impact of NBC on success rates for diverse teacher candidates;
 - The suitability of NBC as an incentive and benchmark for teacher retention; and,
 - The feasibility of additional, parallel pathways that better address the diverse needs of all educators. These options could include tailored solutions for veteran teachers, career changers, and those working in specialized areas such as special education, ESOL, or career and technical education (CTE).

This analysis would provide valuable insights to inform future AIB policy. Just as we would expect a school system to examine the return on investment in their strategic plan, or a principal to review the outcomes from a school improvement plan, we expect the same level of review and adjustment with The Blueprint (*request for AIB consideration*).

12. **Collective Bargaining** - It is essential that we maintain collective bargaining at the local level. We oppose any efforts to amend or expand the collective bargaining law or allow for greater influence and authority by the AIB or the Department in our negotiations. Additionally, we propose that *all items subject to collective bargaining include a waiver process to reconcile any conflicts or the tension between the two statutes* (*requested SBOE/AIB policy or legislation*).

These recommendations address critical gaps in the Blueprint's design and implementation, ensuring policies are better aligned with the realities faced by educators and administrators. We urge the Boards to act on these recommendations through appropriate legislative and regulatory actions. By taking these steps, we can enhance support for educators and administrators, maximize the Blueprint's impact, and advance educational equity and excellence across Maryland.

Pillar 3 - College and Career Readiness-Preparation

successes!

Dual enrollment, as well as course offerings, has grown significantly across the State. In addition, the number of students participating in the Apprenticeship Maryland Program increased from 124 in SY21-22 to 507 in SY22-23. Finally, over 322 career coaches were hired for career counseling programs in the 23-24 SY ([AIB Highlights](#)). Highlights from local school systems...in Harford County the trades are back in focus and student apprenticeships are in full swing for those with a career interest. Wicomico has had a

remarkable increase in dual enrollment at Wor-Wic Community College and Salisbury University. These popular programs are allowing high school students to enroll in college courses and a head start on their college education and a smooth transition into higher learning.

Based on current implementation, we feel strongly that there is a lack of emphasis (and funding) on meeting the needs of students who do not achieve CCR by 10th grade, or for students who chose to pursue Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities. In our opinion, providing funding for students who are only CCR has the opposite effect on the equity goals embedded in the theory of the Blueprint. Therefore, it is our strong recommendation that this pillar be correctly re-defined as “*College and Career Preparation*,” and include equal opportunities and funding for students on either pathway.

13. **Career Counseling - allow LEAs the immediate discretion to discontinue the pilot** partnerships with community colleges and workforce investment boards (WIBs) a year ahead of the pilot’s expiration. The implementation of this initiative has been problematic and inconsistent. Where it is working well, it is largely implemented by staff hired and trained by the districts and should be implemented within LEAs (*legislation required*).
14. **Definition of CCR** - we ask the Department and the State Board to *revisit and revise* the definition to include career credentials. Doing so will highlight the importance of non-college bound students (*requested SBOE policy*).
15. **Dual Enrollment/Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate/CTE - LEAs should have the flexibility to target funding for tuition and ancillary costs.** If sufficient State funding is provided, require districts to cover all costs for *income-eligible students*, but allow districts to limit costs for other students. The implications of unfettered access to all of these resources is not just poor policy, but fiscally negligent (*SBOE/AIB policy and/or legislation required*).
16. **Dual Enrollment - Standardize MOUs with community colleges** - analyze the appropriate balance of shared, and new costs, to ensure equity across the state; this analysis should include all State funding received by community colleges for dual enrollment students (*requested SBOE/AIB policy*).

Pillar 4 - Resources to Ensure All Students Are Successful

successes!

This year will bring a total of 621 community schools statewide and also represents an expansion of community schools to secondary schools for the first time, excluding Baltimore City which already had secondary programs. Locally, Prince George’s has created 109 Community Schools since 2019. Every school has a coordinator, who acts as a liaison between the school and the community to establish and maintain partnerships; at least one full-time

mental health provider who serves students and families and also conducts professional development for staff; and, a registered nurse (RN) is assigned to each community school.

Uncompensated Special Education & Transportation Spending

17. **Compel the MSDE, AIB, and a representative sample of the LEAs through the Joint Chairmen’s Report or some other legislative mechanism *to study differentiated levels of special education funding*, a model implemented in the majority of states. The study should also address:**
- The costs of special education in Maryland and its impact on the ability to fully fund the Blueprint at district levels;
 - The rising costs of special education in PreK students and the appropriate funding formula for these students (currently, these costs are assumed to be covered in the PreK per pupil funding allocation); and,
 - Revisit the Kirwan Commission’s assumption/conclusion that long-term special education costs would be reduced through the implementation of the Blueprint. In practice, this assumption is not materializing and its continued narrative is unhelpful in the evaluation of LEAs’ special education efforts.

Local school systems spend over \$1,038,848,168 in direct special education services that are *NOT* reimbursed by the state and federal governments ([see linked chart](#)). Every single school system would be able to fully implement the Blueprint and exceed its goals and expectations if they were able to fully use the Foundation as intended, without the need to use these funds to pay for profound deficits in special education.

We are well aware that the State budget will not support a marked increase in funding for special education. However, we are highlighting special education to tell the story of how this massive underfunding crowds out our ability to implement the Blueprint and “reallocate resources.”

In a similar way, it is important to note that there are many other factors that are not accounted for, or recognized in the “reallocation of resources” discussion. For example, food service costs, utilities, health care costs, facilities maintenance, debt service, etc. ***In particular, transportation costs also consume more than \$511,959,938 in “discretionary” funding that is not reimbursed or recognized in State and local funding formulas.***

18. ***Community Schools - Allow for a limited amount of funding to be used for fiscal management, compliance, district-wide contracts, and oversight.*** For ease of administration, consistency, and equity a percentage, such as 10% of total funds, seems the most appropriate; however, we are also open to sliding scale based on the number of schools in a district. We understand the hesitancy of our funders to allow for administrative spending, but its importance has been well documented and supported. In fact, “the [Ford Foundation](#) emphasizes that organizations require steady, flexible funding

so [they] can become more resilient and have the tools they need to respond to unexpected challenges and seize moments of opportunity.” Allowing a portion of these funds to scale “moments of opportunity” would provide exponential impact for a district’s network of community schools (*legislation required*).

19. **Extend TSI funding past its current expiration in FY ‘26.** With the adoption of the new Literacy Plan, these funds are more critical than ever to provide the appropriate level of resources (*legislation required*).
20. **Expert Review Teams (ERT) - Reprogram this funding to MSDE to appropriately support the Blueprint’s implementation.** As currently structured, these ERT visits are occurring too soon, without clear guidance and expectations, the “outcomes” are widely unknown, and the feedback loop lacking in consistency and extremely delayed. Feedback is hyper focused on issues that have little to no relevance to the Blueprint. Internal feedback indicates that these visits are not useful to the host schools and statewide, nothing has been undertaken to identify and disseminate best practices from the visits. Unfortunately, for the invested time and resources, the return on investment (student achievement), is low to negligible. This funding would be so much more productive if used to bolster the necessary staff at the Department to support the LEAs.

An alternative option would be to reduce the number of visits each year with clearer and targeted goals (perhaps in line with the literacy plans), and more skilled and consistent evaluation teams. The entire system should be restructured to avoid this continuing as an exercise in compliance that is not fostering any true change or academic success (*legislation required*).

21. **Compel the MSDE, AIB, DBM, DLS and a representative sample of the LEAs through the Joint Chairmen’s Report or some other legislative mechanism to analyze the fiscal mandates of the Blueprint.**
 - Unlike the original analysis done by the Kirwan Commission and its consultants, this should include ALL components of funding education, including transportation, building maintenance, operating and capital funds for school security, health services, food services, employee and retiree health benefits.
 - This analysis should include forecasting of State and local revenues.
 - Special attention should be given to the student-based funding embedded in section 5-234 (*known as the 75/25 provision*) to see if it is working as expected, and if it is the most appropriate model for achieving equity and excellence.
22. **Capital Funding for School Construction - Support a robust and enhanced CIP above the stagnant appropriation of \$450 million and indexed to inflation. The CIP needs to recognize and fund new capital mandates in the Blueprint - particularly PreK & CTE, as well as health suites and “partner spaces” for community schools (SBOE/AIB support).**

Pillar 5 - Governance and Accountability

successes!

All LEAs have submitted two rounds of Blueprint Implementation Plans that are prominently displayed on each district's website. These plans were developed over hundreds of hours with local stakeholder "Blueprint" committees and collaboration at every level in each school system - academics, technology, CTE, and operations. According to the [AIB Highlights](#), in the SY23-24, Expert Review Teams (ERTs) and the Maryland Initiative for Literacy and Equity (MILE at University of Maryland and Morgan State University) visited a total of 133 schools, approximately 10% of schools in Maryland. This school year, visits are planned to approximately 150 schools, focused on elementary literacy and math instruction. Fiscal 2025 is also the inaugural (and beta) year for monthly school fiscal reporting through PowerSchool, demonstrating the flow of education funding to individual schools.

Local school districts need greater flexibility in budgeting. The implementation of the Blueprint has largely been an extreme exercise in compliance-driven and rigid budgeting. In addition, while there is a difference of opinion regarding the sufficiency of the Foundation funding, nearly every school district can demonstrate its deficiency in meeting the basic educational needs of a traditional student, and account for all necessary school operations.

Where there is, or can be, discretion in the Blueprint, we ask that MSDE and AIB respect the diversity of the twenty-four LEAs and their superintendents and local boards to appropriately manage resources to address their priorities. Many of the new reporting requirements have created a one-size-fits-all approach that does nothing to increase student achievement. Further, this approach has not fully embraced or acknowledged the expertise of local school finance officers, especially for the many districts that were already demonstrating efficiency and excellence. At this time, we see no return on this incredible investment of fiscal and human resources in academic progress.

23. ***Allow for the provisions of 5-234 to be aggregated at the school level***, instead of by individual Blueprint category. This would not solve our allocations concerns, but would reduce the accounting and human resources compliance burden in our monthly expenditure reporting. Aggregate reporting would also provide easier interpretation by the public. Lastly, this would maintain the integrity of the provision, demonstrating the appropriate funding following students to their schools (***legislation required***).
24. ***Provide a waiver of 5-234 for small schools***. As discussed above, it has been an universal experience that Foundation funding is insufficient to deliver all basic education needs for traditional students and operations of a school. This deficiency is exacerbated in small schools without significant 'special-populations.' With limited budgets, small schools find it nearly impossible to offer the same academic programming and enrichments as larger, more-resourced schools. While a "small-school supplement" providing for a baseline level of services would be an appropriate funding model to consider, this waiver would be helpful in recognizing the unique budgeting needs of

schools with 350 or fewer students, and allow for schools to legitimately look “over-resourced” by exceeding the 75/25 mandate (*legislation required*).

In developing these two proposals we have identified an ***important conversation to be had with the Boards regarding the unique funding circumstances for both small and large schools.***

There would be great value in discussing the possibility to waive 5-234 allocations for some subset of schools - for example, there are schools in one district where per pupil funding can be as much as three times that of its lowest funded school. If there were flexibility to waive some of the allocation requirements for those schools, while still creating safeguards to ensure schools with the highest needs are funded at significantly higher levels, resources could be freed up for small schools, or to address other unique discrepancies in individual school funding.

Implementation Guidance

Nothing has frustrated the local implementation efforts of the Blueprint more than the untimely and delayed guidance and instructions from both the Department and the AIB.

25. ***In order to strengthen our partnership and mutual respect for workloads and capacity, we ask that the Boards implement an ironclad policy that restricts the requirement of any report without appropriate time for submission and advanced guidelines or templates.*** Where this is not possible, timelines shall be extended. For initiatives that do not require the promulgation of regulations, we request that guidance and templates shall be provided to the LEAs in draft form 6 months before it is due, or in final form, no later than 4 months before a deadline (*SBOE/AIB policy*).

If a submission date is embedded in the statute and the Boards do not believe the AIB can exercise its plenary authority to adjust the timeline, we ask for a legislative change to allow for either Board to make these adjustments moving forward (legislation required).

26. ***No further education-related legislation shall be enacted without a mandate to adopt a new, or amend an existing state regulation or policy.*** Regulations allow new policies to be vetted by the public and local school systems. They also allow for a reasonable amount of time to implement initiatives following final adoption of the new regulations. All legislation should be drafted with a clear distinction between the new law’s effective date, the timeline for adoption of new or amended policies aligned with implementation, and the school year in which full implementation is to begin (*legislation required*).

27. ***Study Narrative for the Blueprint’s Interim Evaluation*** - we ask that the evaluation team address the number of reporting requirements and whether the reports are serving their intended purpose (*AIB policy*).

28. **By legislation or Board policies**, direct the MSDE, AIB, DLS and a representative sample of the LEAs to:
- Undertake a **comprehensive review of the current required 179 reports** and updates that are required under the Blueprint and in compliance with existing requirements in the Education Article, COMAR, and joint AIB/MSDE established policies.
 - Undertake a comprehensive review of the Blueprint statute **to clearly delineate responsibilities for the MSDE and AIB.**
29. Restructuring and clarifying the relationship of the MSDE and AIB would be very beneficial in the implementation of the Blueprint. We support legislation **focusing the oversight and accountability of the Blueprint with the AIB, while reestablishing the MSDE and the State Board as the education policy-making entities.** This change would clarify roles and responsibilities, and establish clear guidance to the LEAs that they are governed by the procedures and processes promulgated by the MSDE and the State Board (**legislation required**).
30. **Staying focused and invested in the Blueprint.** We need the Department, AIB, and General Assembly's partnership to **resist any new programs or unfunded mandates** that are not directly aligned with the Blueprint or funded appropriately. All new legislative initiatives should be discretionary and/or authorizing. The obligations and expectations on schools since the pandemic have exploded and the time for clear focus and dogged determination to **educate** our students **has** to rise to the highest priority.

For more information, please contact Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director at marypat.fannon@pssam.org.

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