

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future

Testimony Before the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee William E. Kirwan June 20, 2024

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and committee members, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the recently enacted PreK-12 education reform legislation in Maryland, entitled *The Blueprint for Maryland's Future*. The Blueprint is a multi-year, comprehensive plan that addresses all aspects of a child's education from birth to high school completion, including most especially the recruitment, retention, and compensation of high-quality teachers.

To understand the magnitude and rationale of the changes called for in the Blueprint, I need to take you back to the fall of 2016 when the Governor and General Assembly asked me to chair a 27-member commission, the *Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education*. The Commission included members of the General Assembly, the business community, collective bargaining entities, state and local PreK-12 school officials, the State Superintendent, and higher education representatives.

The charge to the commission was bold: Make recommendations so that Maryland's PreK-12 system will perform as well as the top-performing school systems in the world. Supported by staff from the National Center for Education and Economy, the Commission spent three years examining in great depth the elements of several of the world's highest-performing school systems, including Finland, Shanghai, China, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada. These systems all scored at or near the top on international student assessments, and almost all of their students completed a rigorous course of high school study.

During the Commission's work, we discovered a remarkable thing. Even though these high-performing systems were on three different continents and operated in various economic, political, and cultural contexts, they all adhered to five basic principles that led to their success: invest in early childhood development and education; prepare, compensate, and treat teachers like other professionals; develop a fully aligned, rigorous PreK-12 instructional system; invest heavily in students needing the most support to be successful; and require a high degree of accountability at the school level. These principles became the five pillars of the Commission's recommendations. Our recommendations were sent to the General Assembly and incorporated into the Blueprint for Maryland's Future legislation, codified in 2021.

I'll briefly describe the five pillars of the Blueprint but spend a little more time on the pillar involved with preparing and developing a high-quality teaching corps since this is the focus of today's hearing.

Pillar One is a significant new state investment in early childhood development and education. This investment is based on what we learned about the high-performing systems we studied. For example:

- All countries benchmarked as top performers offer free or very low-cost, high-quality early childhood education for three-to five-year-olds (compulsory schooling typically begins at age six in these countries).
- Finland, for example, ensures that at least one-third of the childcare workers and the lead teacher in every preschool program have a bachelor's degree.
- In Ontario, all teachers of four- and five-year-olds must have full certification as regular teachers. Full-day kindergarten is free for all four- and five-year-olds in Ontario, and almost all five-year-olds are enrolled.

Based on this analysis, the Blueprint expands existing centers and creates new centers across the state to support low-income families with young children on issues such as parenting, nutrition, and early child development. It also calls for high-quality full-day preschool, free for all three—and four-year-old children from low-income families.

Following the lead of the benchmarked countries, the Blueprint requires preschool lead teachers to hold a bachelor's degree and an early childhood certification. They are compensated at levels comparable to K-12 teachers. Pre-school teaching assistants must have at least a Child Development Associate certification.

Because of the initiatives in Pillar One, we have already seen indications of an increase in the number of children coming to kindergarten ready to learn.

Pillar two concerns high-quality teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. I'll return to it in a minute.

The third pillar concerns the PreK-12 instructional system. Based on what the Commission learned from high-performing systems, the Blueprint requires periodic reviews to ensure that the state's standards and curriculum are comparable in rigor and standards to other high-performing systems and are aligned and properly sequenced. The use of high-quality instructional materials by teachers trained in their use is a critical component of this pillar. It also includes intervention strategies to keep struggling learners on grade level. This pillar aims to build an instructional system that allows most kids to meet the college and career-ready (CCR) standard by the end of the 10th grade and no later than high school graduation. Incidentally, the Blueprint defines college and career readiness as getting students to the level to take credit-bearing entry-level college courses without remediation. Once students are CCR, they can follow one of three pathways: an advanced placement international baccalaureate curriculum, early college/dual enrollment with the possibility of earning an associate's degree for free in high school, or a rigorous career and technical education pathway, with apprenticeships, to achieve an industry-certified credential. This later pathway is modeled on the highly successful and rigorous technical education pathways in the high-performing systems studied by the Commission.

The fourth pillar involves investments in students who traditionally have struggled to be successful, including students from low-income families, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. A significant component of this pillar is the creation of *community schools*, which serve districts where 55% or more of students come from low-income families. Community schools are allocated extra resources for tutors, after-school and summer academic programming, counseling, and social services.

Addressing childhood poverty is a fundamental element of the Blueprint. One of the Commission's "aha" moments was the recognition that while nations with top-performing systems may spend less on education per student than systems in the US, these countries have comprehensive social safety nets and do not allow their children to grow up in poverty. Some in the U.S. would argue that the social safety net provided by community schools for students and their families is beyond the role of public schools. The Commission concluded, however, that it must make this investment for every student, no matter their zip code, to receive a high-quality education. After all, if a student cannot see the chalkboard because of a lack of glasses or their stomachs are rumbling because they haven't had breakfast, we cannot expect them to learn.

The fifth pillar concerns accountability. Given the massive changes called for in the Blueprint, which involves state agencies outside of the state Department of Education, the legislation created a new oversight entity called the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB). This Board comprises seven individuals appointed by the Governor from names provided by an independent nominating body. The AIB has plenary powers to approve local Blueprint implementation plans, to send in expert teams to address the underperformance of individual schools, to require personnel changes in low-performing schools, and even withhold funds from districts not meeting the Blueprint's goals and expectations.

I'll now return to Pillar Two, which is high-quality teacher recruitment and retention. The Commission observed that in every country it studied with high-performing school systems, teaching is a well-regarded and well-compensated profession that attracts talent similar to other high-status professions in these countries. Their teacher preparation programs are rigorous, and certification standards are high. Moreover, teachers are treated as true professionals. They are given a significant degree of classroom autonomy and are actively engaged in research on upgrading curricula and improving pedagogy.

Teaching is such a desired profession in top-performing countries that teacher preparation programs must recruit prospective teachers from the upper academic ranks of the college-bound graduating cohort: the top 50% in Shanghai, 33% in Singapore, 30% in Ontario, and 25% in Finland. Admission to teacher preparation programs in these countries is highly competitive. For example, admission to teacher preparation programs in Finland is more competitive than law school. The proportion of acceptances to applicants for places in university teacher education programs in top-performing jurisdictions ranges from one acceptance for every ten applicants to a little more than one acceptance for every four applicants. In addition to presenting a strong academic record, top-performing systems require that successful candidates complete demanding

interviews and assessment processes involving their passion for teaching, ability to relate to children, and ability to collaborate with colleagues. Starting pay for teachers in these countries is comparable to other high-status professions.

The Commission learned that in Shanghai and Singapore, the world's leaders in teacher development, teachers progress up a well-defined sequence of steps. As they progress, they acquire more responsibility, authority, status, and compensation, much as one would in a large law firm in the United States progress from associate to junior partner, to senior partner, to managing partner. Ontario, Shanghai, and Singapore have well-developed systems to induct new teachers into the profession. They are tightly structured and monitored. Mentors are recruited and selected through an interview process. They are then trained and evaluated on their effectiveness as mentors.

Essentially, all of these strategies are embedded in pillar two of the Blueprint. Our teacher preparation programs are upgrading the rigor of their curriculum, and the State Department of Education is revising certification standards.

The Blueprint's underlying principle for teacher compensation is that, as professionals, teachers should be compensated at the same level as other professions requiring similar levels of education, such as architects and CPAs. Based on a comparison of starting salaries in these similar professions, the Blueprint sets the starting wages for all new teachers at \$60,000 no later than July 1, 2026. Many of the large school districts in Maryland are already close to this goal, and starting salaries will likely exceed \$60,000 as they compete with each other and neighboring states to attract high-quality teachers.

However, the Blueprint goes much further in addressing compensation and the work environment for teachers.

To ensure high-quality teachers are incentivized to stay in the classroom, the Blueprint includes a career ladder for teachers modeled on what we learned from the high-performing systems. The career ladder has multiple rungs of advancement and compensation based on a teacher's classroom success with students. To be and stay on the career ladder, a teacher must be board-certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. There is ample research-based evidence that Board certification improves a teacher's classroom effectiveness. The Blueprint provides an annual \$10,000 bonus for board certification. Teachers can also earn an additional \$7,000 annually for teaching in schools serving communities with a high concentration of poverty. With the Blueprint, successful teachers could earn six-figure salaries after a half dozen years in the profession.

As teachers move up the career ladder, the Blueprint requires them to assume greater responsibility for mentoring new teachers, supporting professional learning communities among teachers, and engaging in research on curriculum development and new teaching and learning strategies. In sum, they will collaborate with other teachers to advance the success of their schools, not spend the entire day working alone, isolated in a single classroom. **A recent national survey showed that Maryland led the nation in the increase of students entering teacher preparation programs,**

an encouraging sign that the Blueprint strategies for treating teachers as true professionals are already having an impact.

One of our nation's most significant challenges today is the declining quality of PreK-12 education. Student absenteeism is at an all-time high, and teacher shortages are at crisis levels in most states. Our nation's students do not perform well in international assessments. Alarm bells should be ringing across the country. Our nation can't sustain its global leadership in the decades to come if our children don't have access to an education at the level presently offered in other advanced economies. The Blueprint's goal is to ensure that Maryland's children receive as good an education as students anywhere else in the world, and the state has made a remarkable commitment to achieve that end. We hope the Blueprint will become a model for other states to emulate. Our nation's children need and deserve no less.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to responding to any questions you may have.