

# The Washington Post

Local

# Battle lines drawn on public funding for private schools



By **Brianna Rhodes** | AP March 2 at 3:25 PM

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — More than 1,000 private school students and chaperones greeted and cheered Gov. Larry Hogan's arrival down the steps of the Maryland State House on Nonpublic School Advocacy day Thursday morning.

Students from 12 Maryland counties and Baltimore city schools attended a rally at Lawyers Mall in Annapolis in support of the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today program, also known as BOOST.

BOOST was created in 2016 to provide \$5 million for private school vouchers, and allows students with educational needs to attend nonpublic schools through vouchers.

This year, Hogan, R, is working to add millions more dollars to the program.

About 40 schools, including St. Francis International School, St. Casimir Catholic School, and Liberty Christian School, were in attendance as well as teachers, principals, superintendents, and parents to show their support.

Middle school teacher Anna Crisci from St. Michael's School in Ridge, Maryland, said that the program helps a lot of students due to large class sizes in area public schools.

"This money definitely helps our school," Crisci told the University of Maryland's Capital News Service. "We wouldn't be open if we didn't have BOOST money."

"To have a private school where they get one-on-one education is so important . small class sizes, especially for kids who struggle with reading and math," said Crisci. "It's so important to have that one-on-one."

Principal Liz Whelan of St. Peter's Catholic School in Olney, Maryland, also attended the rally to show support of the private funding that help students from various backgrounds at her school.

"I think it's so important that the state and for everybody to recognize that we're thankful that they appreciate all of the students in the state of Maryland and it benefits all of the students of all nationalities and all different groups of people," said Whelan.

Whelan also said the BOOST scholarship helps students receive free and reduced-price lunch.

"We have 12 families that get a scholarship that helps them with their tuition," Whelan said. "So we're so thrilled and came out here to say thanks to the governor."

At the rally, Hogan said that he will continue to fight for the program that was unanimously approved last year in the state Senate.

A coalition of lawmakers and activist groups gathered in Annapolis on Tuesday to vocally oppose the program.

Hogan has yet to address at least \$2.9 billion needed increased in public school funding for each year, according to the ACLU of Maryland and Maryland State Education Association. The \$2.9 billion budget gap study was conducted by Maryland State Department Education consultants, APA Consulting.

The governor has fully funded public schools, and then some, proposing a total of \$6.4 billion to K-12 education in the upcoming 2018 budget.

Supporters of the BOOST program say it offers upward mobility to students who would otherwise be stuck in underperforming public schools.

Advocates for the program also argue that the program helps at risk students from “failing schools.”

But opponents of the BOOST program argued that it takes away taxpayers money from public schools to subsidize private school tuition, and said that 78 percent of students who received vouchers from the BOOST program were already enrolled in private schools, based on 2016-2017 BOOST program data, according to the Maryland ACLU and teacher’s union.

“This evidence shows that they used the program to support students that are already in their school for every child they accepted from a public school,” Betty Weller, Maryland State Education Association president, said during the Tuesday press conference.

Another issue that opponents are concerned about is that schools do not have to meet the nondiscrimination laws set in place at public schools, which allows private schools to legally discriminate in employment based on religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity, according to the ACLU and state education union.

Ninety-seven percent of schools that have received subsidies are religious, according to the ACLU and teachers union.

The ACLU is against the program because of civil rights and public funding issues.

“Ninety-seven percent of schools that benefit from this taxpayer subsidy are religious,” said Tishan Weerasooriya, ACLU of Maryland Public Policy Advocate, at the press conference. “This is a cause of our great concern because using taxpayers dollars to fund religious institutions only entangles state governments with religious teachings.”

Maryland Parent and Teacher Association President Elizabeth Ysla-Leight expressed her concern for student’s families.

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“It’s important for parents to know that their tax dollars are going to be well spent,” Ysla-Leight said Tuesday. “And while I appreciate protect our schools, It is very important that we remember, it should also protect our families as well because there’s a trickle down effect. When schools are not able to provide certain, minimal services and supplies guess who they call? They contact the parents.”

Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz said he believes this initiative is contributing to a nationwide effort by way of the Republican Party.

“This voucher-based program is really a part of a Republican effort to privatize public schools,” said Kamenetz. “Marylanders want public money to be invested in our public schools. We need to protect our public schools system.”

-- CNS correspondent Jacob Taylor contributed to this story.

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