The Anne Arundel County Board of Education OPPOSES House Bill 878 - Public Charter School Act of 2017. This Administration bill establishes a Maryland Public Charter School Authority (MPCSA) that may authorize the establishment of public charter schools in any jurisdiction in the State, making it an alternative to the local boards of education as a public chartering authority. MPCSA consists of seven members appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate. MPCSA may exempt a public charter school that it authorizes from any policy or requirement established by a county board, and from specified State policies or regulations and any other State policy or regulation expressly waived by the State Board of Education. Employees of a public charter school authorized by MPCSA are not public school employees in the county in which the public charter school is located. The bill specifies funding mechanisms for public charter schools. Funding for MPCSA administrative costs is as provided in the State budget; the bill expresses the intent that at least $500,000 of the fiscal 2018 budget be included for MPCSA.

The Maryland Public Charter School Act of 2003 established an alternative means within the existing public school system to provide innovative learning opportunities and creative educational approaches to improve student education. The Anne Arundel County Board of Education supports public charter schools as part of the school choice that is available within Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS). As with all schools that are a part of the local school system, we support holding public charter schools accountable to the local board of education. The Board remains supportive of all efforts, within the limits of its resources, which provide opportunities to implement school level reform and creative models of delivering instructional programs. However, there remains a need for a certain level of accountability to ensure first and foremost that students are learning and that public money is being spent appropriately. As such, charter schools should be established in response to an unmet need or resources the school system cannot provide. Charter school providers should collaborate with the school system for additional school choice for students/parents in a strategic manner. The Anne Arundel County Board of Education opposes legislation such as House Bill 878 which would diminish the local board's role as sole chartering and oversight authority, or otherwise weaken the charter school law’s academic or fiscal accountability requirements.

House Bill 878 would essentially strip away any and all local board authority over charter schools by establishing the MPCSA to take on the current roles and responsibilities of local school boards. A particularly concerning aspect of the legislation is the ability of MPCSA to
exempt a public charter school it authorizes from any policy or requirement established by a county board, and from specified State policies or regulations and any other State policy or regulation expressly waived by the State Board of Education. We oppose blanket waivers for charter schools that release them from compliance with state law and board policies leaving little room for accountability and quality assurance.

Furthermore, House Bill 878 indicates that the State must distribute directly to a public charter school authorized by MPCSA an amount equal to the total enrollment of the public charter school multiplied by all federal, State, and county operating funds for elementary, middle, and secondary students the county board receives from all sources, per full-time equivalent student. An equal amount of funding is then deducted from the State share of the foundation program, under the bill. The funding mechanisms proposed in the bill clearly alter the distribution of State education aid and may affect overall State funding levels.

The Anne Arundel County Board of Education has worked diligently to cultivate positive relationships with our charter operators, which has resulted in open dialogue between both parties. The ability to communicate openly, allows for honest negotiation around certain autonomies which are essential for charter schools to be successful.

Accordingly, the Anne Arundel County Board of Education respectfully requests an UNFAVORABLE committee report on House Bill 878.