



RESEARCH BRIEF

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An Overview: Maryland's Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Scholarship Program

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

BOOST has led to cost savings for the state, and expanding the program will result in expanded cost savings.

There is extreme demand from parents for the BOOST Program and applications for scholarships are at new highs.

Parents want more options than their neighborhood public schools. BOOST allows them the freedom to select a school that best fits their child's needs.

Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan signed the BOOST Scholarship into law in 2016, establishing the state's sole private school choice program, but in 2023, Gov. Wes Moore proposed reducing funding and phasing out BOOST, limiting scholarships to siblings of current recipients (1). Thankfully, during the 2023 legislative session, Maryland lawmakers allocated \$9 million to preserve BOOST scholarships, rejecting the governor's phase-out proposal with bipartisan support.

State lawmakers are deciding BOOST program funding for 2024-2025. Maryland lawmakers should protect and expand the BOOST Scholarship program for several reasons: it has led to cost savings for the state, there is significant parental demand for the scholarships, and adopting education choice policies brings numerous benefits to families. This brief offers an overview of the program, presents evidence of parental demand and satisfaction among BOOST families, highlights the benefits of education choice, and provides recommendations for state lawmakers.

Program Overview

Then-Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan signed the “Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today” (BOOST) Scholarship into law in 2016. BOOST is Maryland’s only private school choice program. Before BOOST’s adoption, access to Maryland private schools was limited to individuals who could cover tuition themselves or secure support through privately funded scholarship initiatives like the Children’s Scholarship Fund Baltimore. (3) In 2023, Gov. Wes Moore (D) proposed cutting BOOST funding from \$10 million to \$8 million and eventually phasing out the program by not allowing new students to receive scholarships, except for siblings of current recipients (2).

State lawmakers must annually appropriate taxpayer spending to the BOOST program—that is, the scholarships are not part of the traditional K-12 funding formula. Thus, funding for the 2024-2025 fiscal year hinges on the decision of lawmakers when the General Assembly reconvenes on January 10, 2024. Nearly 20,000 life-changing scholarships have been awarded over the last six years, and parents and children alike hope to see BOOST funding expanded during this legislative session (4).

During the 2023 legislative session, Maryland lawmakers agreed to appropriate \$9 million to BOOST scholarships and did not adopt the governor’s proposal to phase out the scholarships. The governor’s proposal included provisions that would have limited future BOOST students to only current recipients and their siblings (5). The scholarship program has received bipartisan support from Republicans and Democrats, as Senate President Bill Ferguson, (D-Baltimore), voted to preserve the program (6). In early March 2023, ten members of Maryland’s House of Delegates and State Senate, including members from both sides of the aisle, spoke at a student rally supporting BOOST scholarships at the state capitol (7). During this rally on Nonpublic School Advocacy Day, lawmakers publicly vocalized their support and told the students that they are “the future of Maryland and encouraged them to tell [other] legislators about the impact the scholarships [were] having on their lives,” (8).

Program Eligibility. The Maryland State Department of Education awards scholarships to eligible students as determined by the BOOST Advisory Board (9). The BOOST Advisory Board members are appointed by the Governor, President of the Senate, and Speaker of the House of Delegates (10). Students are eligible for the BOOST Scholarship if they reside in households with incomes less than or equal to 100 percent of the federal free and reduced-price lunch program (equivalent to \$55,000 for a family of four in 2023-2024) (11). For the 2022-2023 school year, the average household income of those awarded a scholarship was \$34,608 (12). “[Oftentimes] due to limited funding, the BOOST Program is unable to provide scholarships to all qualified applicants. Priority is given to students who were recipients of a BOOST award in the previous year [and who still qualify for either free or reduced-price meals],” (13).

Program Funding. For the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the program received \$9 million in state taxpayer-funded appropriations, plus any carry-over of unused funds from the previous year (14). Of the appropriation, \$700,000 is set aside for additional awards for

students with special needs (15). Scholarships are provided as vouchers, payable to participating private schools, and their values vary between \$1,200 and \$4,750, with an additional \$3,000 for high school students (16). The BOOST Advisory Board also considers students' special needs when determining scholarship amounts, allocating an additional award equal to the base award amount for these students (17). "For any student whose parents indicate that they receive special education services, the nonpublic school must confirm this by uploading a copy of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or 504 plan," (18). For students who are not classified as special needs, the amount of scholarship award may not exceed the lesser of, "the statewide average per pupil expenditure by local education agencies, as calculated by the [Maryland State Department of Education] MSDE; or the tuition of the nonpublic school," (19).

Since BOOST's inception in 2016, almost 20,000 scholarships have been awarded to students. For the 2022-2023 school year, nearly 3,250 students were awarded scholarships, and students residing in 21 out of 24 counties, and the city of Baltimore participated in the program (20).

Program Cost Savings. BOOST scholarship awards are significantly smaller than taxpayer spending per student in Maryland, resulting in cost savings. These cost savings are realized in part because when students transfer from public to private schools, public schools are no longer educating those students. But schools realize cost savings in the future because, though schools have some short-run fixed costs such as facility operations and maintenance, in the long run, all costs are variable costs. Taxpayers spent \$18,069 per student in Maryland public schools in 2019-2020 (the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education), but the average BOOST scholarship award was \$3,134 in the 2022-2023 academic year (21). The number of BOOST scholarships budgeted for the 2022-2023 academic year totaled \$10 million, which is equivalent to 0.76 percent of Maryland's total K-12 expenditures (22). In addition, a recent study by the CATO Institute found that in the years 2016-2019: "...[BOOST] voucher payments were \$15.6 million, and Maryland's Department of Education costs were reduced by \$21.4 million, resulting in \$5.8 million in net savings [for the state]" (23).

Challenges in Baltimore Public Schools and the Case for Prioritizing Cost-Effective Alternatives like BOOST. Just three years later, in 2022, it was reported that 23 Baltimore public district schools did not have a single student who was proficient in math (24). If public schools fail to provide students with the education they deserve, and parents are advocating for alternatives like the BOOST program – where, due to high demand, there is a waitlist for scholarships –we shouldn't increase spending for public schools, especially when these alternatives prove cost-effective for the state (25).

Program Regulations. The BOOST program has various requirements typical among publicly funded private school scholarship programs, such as requiring schools to administer national norm-referenced assessments in grades 3-12 and requiring schools to have at least one grade above kindergarten. However, the program does require that

schools participating in the program adhere to Maryland's Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as amended and Title 20 Subtitle 6 of the State Governor Article, which states that "...private schools eligible for vouchers to not discriminate in student admissions, retention, expulsion, or otherwise based on race, color, national origin, sexual orientation or gender identity or expression," (26). Religious liberty protection is present for schools participating in the program; nevertheless, one school was recently expelled due to its stated beliefs about marriage and sexuality (27). Maryland stands alone as the sole state with a private school choice program where schools are mandated to rigorously comply with sexual orientation and gender identity requirements (28). Private schools shouldn't be punished for the values they wish to exhibit to students. Upholding diverse perspectives and respecting religious freedoms is essential for fostering a truly inclusive educational environment.

Evidence of Parental Demand and Satisfaction. Those who oppose private school scholarships often claim that the scholarship amount granted is rarely sufficient to cover the total cost of private school tuition and fees (29). When surveyed, "only 6 percent of SY2017-2018 BOOST families who did not participate in the program the following year attributed it to cost or insufficient financial aid," (30). In addition, many BOOST scholarship students received other types of financial aid from their respective schools. It was stated in the Joint Chairman's Report on the BOOST program of 2023 that of the 1,806 students who attended the same school in 2021-2022SY as they did in the 2022-2023SY, 87 percent received additional aid from the private school or other organization annually, averaging \$5,439, and \$5,123 respectively (31). Combining BOOST vouchers with additional assistance enhances the affordability of private schools for low-income families (32).

Strong Parental Demand. Evidence of strong parental support is also evident in the demand for the program. At the July 2023 BOOST Advisory Board meeting, the board said that there was "'extreme demand' [for the program] and that the number of applicants hit new highs," (33). During the meeting, it was announced that there were 7,036 applications for BOOST scholarships, up from about 6,000 applications they received last year (34). Of the 7,036 applicants, it was determined that 4,741 applicants were income-eligible (35). If all income-eligible applicants were awarded a scholarship, the board would have needed about \$18 million in total funding for BOOST, surpassing the \$9 million that was appropriated for the program this year. Unfortunately, because of the number of applicants, the Advisory board concluded that no new applicants could be awarded scholarships, and only those students who received scholarships last year and their siblings would be considered for awards (36).

In addition, around one in five (or 20 percent) of students in Maryland are income-eligible for a BOOST scholarship, approximately 177,980 students (37). Rabbi Ariel Sadwin, executive director of Agudath Israel of Maryland, said, "There are these students who are crying out saying we want this opportunity, let us have this opportunity," (38). The surge in application numbers and widespread support demonstrates the importance of not only establishing the program permanently, but also providing scholarships for all students who apply.

Benefits of Education Choice

Education Choice Opportunities in Maryland. Parents know their children the best and want to provide the best possible education options to them. However, parents in Maryland, outside of those participating in the relatively small BOOST program, do not have many choices for their child's education. For them, access to a quality education is conditional on their ability to purchase an expensive home or to pay twice: both for their child's private school tuition and taxes, much of which goes to pay for assigned public schools. Maryland doesn't have interdistrict or intradistrict open enrollment policies; charter schools are the only other publicly funded education choice option, but "most charter schools are in the Baltimore-Washington area, making them geographically inaccessible to many Marylanders," (39).

Increased parental demand for education choice in Maryland is not surprising as just this year, policymakers in other states "adopted the most significant expansions of parental choice in education in U.S. history," (40). Seven states passed new education choice policies, and nine states expanded existing choice policies, empowering parents with more opportunities for their children's education. Parents want more options than just their neighborhood public schools, and they are embracing the idea that "education choice" and programs like BOOST allow them to select a school that best fits their child's needs and aligns with their values. Recent polling also underscores a growing discontent among parents with the K-12 system. Between 2022 and 2023, a Gallup poll revealed an increase in dissatisfaction among parents, rising from 55 percent to 63 percent, coupled with a notable decline in satisfaction from 42 percent to 36 percent (41).

Education choice allows access to safer learning environments. Parents want safe schools for their children. At least one study finds that parent choice in education is correlated with school safety: A 2016 study "found that school choice participants in Milwaukee were half as likely to commit felonies and misdemeanors as those who went to their local public school," (42). Parents typically prioritize safety above all else (43). Once assured that their child is in a secure school environment, they then can focus on evaluating the academic rigor and curriculum offerings.

Education choice creates accountability among schools. The option of choice aids certain students in transitioning to schools that better suit their needs. Education choice empowers parents with accountability, motivating schools to address the needs of their students. Unsatisfied parents can opt to transfer their children and education funds elsewhere, creating a powerful incentive for schools to excel.

Education choice empowers parents to select learning environments that align with their values. Parents aim to transmit their values and cultural heritage to their children, anticipating that schools will assist, or at the very least, refrain from hindering this endeavor (44). However, there is a growing apprehension among parents regarding public schools that appear to promote an ideological agenda conflicting with their values (45). Examples include teaching children that individuals are categorized as "oppressors" or "oppressed" based on immutable racial characteristics or that "gender" is a "spectrum" that is unconnected to biological sex," (46). In March 2023, parents whose

children attend public schools in Montgomery County, Maryland, were informed by the local school board that a new LGBTQ book curriculum, "Pride Storybooks," would be introduced for pre-k through fifth graders (47). Notably, unlike in previous years, parents were told they could not opt their children out of the program, and no notifications would be provided regarding when their children would be exposed to the material (48). For parents who want alternatives to the public school system, education choice is their answer. Education choice empowers families to choose learning environments that align with their values.

Education choice increases academic achievement and attainment among students. The ability to choose one's education has been shown to enhance academic achievement and attainment. Regarding academic achievement, "Researchers have so far conducted 16 random assignment studies, the gold standard of empirical research...Of those 16, 10 studies found statistically significant positive effects for participating students. Just two found negative effects, which were unique to a heavily regulated program in Louisiana that has discouraged high-performing private schools from participating, and four found neutral effects," (49). Pertaining to academic attainment, encompassing both high school completion and college enrollment among participating students, "Researchers have conducted five random assignment studies...Three of these studies found increases in high school graduation rates and college enrollment, and two found null effects, for students enrolling in school choice programs such as vouchers and tax credit scholarships" (50).

Some families may be satisfied with their child's assigned public school, and anyone who does not wish to use a BOOST Scholarship is not required to do so. However, those seeking different education options or a learning environment that better aligns with their values can explore alternative schools. With more choices available, the chances of finding the best-fitting school for a child increase.

Recommendations for State Lawmakers

State lawmakers should make BOOST a permanent program and increase funding levels to meet demand. Whenever the legislature reconvenes this upcoming January, state lawmakers should pass legislation making the BOOST program and its funding permanent. Policymakers should also increase funding for the program to match demand. Ahead of the 2023-2024 school year, the program received a "record high" number of applicants for the program. The program needed \$18 million in appropriations funding to meet parents' demands.

Modify the funding model to be formula-funded instead of an annual line-item appropriation. The BOOST scholarships should be part of the state funding formula for assigned K-12 schools, not a separate appropriation. Transitioning to a formula-funded model would reduce the political back-and-forth arising from yearly appropriations processes and the impulses of various administrations (51). It would also create a fairer distribution of scholarship funding compared to funding allocated for Maryland public and charter schools, especially concerning students with special needs.

Convert the program into an Education Savings Account (ESA). State lawmakers should convert the BOOST voucher scholarship into an education savings account (ESA). An ESA empowers families with the freedom and the flexibility to customize their child's education. Families would be able to use their ESAs to pay for private school tuition, tutoring, textbooks, homeschool curriculum, online courses, educational therapy, and more. Another feature of ESAs is that unused funds can be rolled over each year into a college savings account. Any remaining ESA funds revert to the state either upon college graduation or a set period of time after the child completes high school.

Expand scholarship eligibility to all students. State legislators should eliminate the income eligibility caps that restrict the annual participation of children. Doing away with the current income limit for BOOST participation would open up the program to more families from diverse backgrounds and incentivize greater engagement of private schools and the broader community.

Conclusion

The bottom line is BOOST Scholarships are changing lives, and this is evident in the stories of the parents whose children have participated in BOOST and shown an outpouring of appreciation and support for the program. Last March, amidst the risk of program funding cuts, about 300 students and 50 principals, teachers, and parents from 27 Catholic, other Christian, and Jewish schools across Maryland assembled at the State Capitol in Annapolis. Nefertari Lee, whose two sons graduated from Calvert Hall College High School in Towson in 2022 and 2016 with the help of BOOST Scholarships, attended the rally and said this about the program, "I believe in school choice, and BOOST gives these children opportunities that will help them later in life," (52). She later went on to say that BOOST is "an 'invaluable program' and a 'lifeline' that 'changes lives' and helps children thrive," (53). Another parent, Desiree, whose daughter is a BOOST recipient, said, "[BOOST] allows me to keep my daughter in the school of my choice. And to give her the proper educational tools that I think she deserves," (54). Rabbi Yochman Stengel, the high school principal of Bnos Yisroel, an orthodox Jewish School for girls in Baltimore, said the BOOST program offers vital assistance to hardworking parents. He went on to say, "This [the BOOST program] is huge; it literally allows schools to keep these children who otherwise would not be able to pay the tuition fees," (55). Maryland lawmakers should make BOOST a permanent program and increase funding levels to meet the demand of parents in their state.

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Endnotes

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- (6) Ibid.
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- (9) Ibid.
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- (17) Ibid.
- (18) "Program Information Guide: Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Scholarship Program, 2023-2024 School Year," Ibid.
- (19) "House Bill 588," Pg.162, <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2021RS/bills/hb/hbo588E.pdf> (accessed on December 21, 2023)
- (20) "Maryland Boost Scholarship Coalition," Ibid.
- (21) National Center for Education Statistics, 2022 Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 236.75 Total and Current Expenditures Per Pupil in Fall Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Public Schools, by Function and State or Jurisdiction: School Year 2019-20," https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_236.75.asp; "Maryland: Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Program," Ibid.
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- (23) Russell Rhine, "Maryland's BOOST Is Promising, but More Work Is Needed," February 26, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/marylands-boost-promising-more-work-needed> (accessed on December 12, 2020)
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