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Executive Nominations Committee

Joint Committee on Ending Homelessness

Chair

Joint Committee on Fair Practices and
State Personnel Oversight

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Support: SB 298 - Election Law – Local Public Campaign Financing – Boards of Education

The Issue:

- Low levels of compensation, intense time commitments, and requirements to fund and run a campaign make it difficult to attract and elect strong candidates for county boards of education.
- The escalating cost of campaigns for public office restricts the breadth and freedom of political expression; too often money, rather than public support, determines who runs for office.
- Many board of education races are county-wide, with increasing populations and limited ability to raise funds, making it increasingly difficult for candidates to reach a meaningful number of voters, resulting in somewhat random or arbitrary election results.
- Private financing causes disparities in the ability of different groups and individuals to communicate their views about politics and government.

What Does SB 298 Do?

- SB298 allows counties to implement a system of public financing for elected members of the county boards of education after first implementing public financing for County Council and County Executive
- It expands the county offices eligible for public campaign financing to go beyond just legislative and executive offices (current law - Chapter 419, 2013) to include the boards of education.
- Requires that counties interested in public financing must first implement public must first implement it for the council and executive before their school board.
- Requires counties to provide funds and staffing for their own public financing systems.

How Does SB 298 Help?

- Public financing of elections, including those for boards of education, will help prevent undue influence of individual donors on the outcomes of local elections.
- Public financing programs encourage candidates to run for office with the support of their communities.
 - In 2018 in Montgomery County candidates who participated in the matching program received 92% more contributions from individuals on average than non-participating candidates; nearly twice as many individual contributions.
 - Small donations accounted for 94% of total fundraising dollars raised by candidates receiving matching funds, versus only 8% for those not participating in the program.

- The program included a diverse, bipartisan mixture of incumbent and first-time candidates competitively fundraising by soliciting only small-dollar donations from individual members of their community.
- These programs are gaining popularity in Maryland because small-dollar public funding programs empower those with community-supported ideas who may not have connections to deep-pocketed interests.
- Locally elected boards of education play important roles in our communities and manage increasingly complex public concerns and large budgets; they have similar needs and deserve the same access to public funding for their elections granted to legislative and executive candidates.
- This legislation leaves the decision for establishing a system of public campaign financing in the hands of the local governments, who are best situated to determine whether such a policy is in their best interest and how to pay for it.
- Public financing of campaign activity is a promising way to facilitate public participation without the more drastic measures of government restriction of political expenditures and contributions or repressive governmental regulations of political speech and association.
- The election of public officials is an essential aspect of a free society and the integrity of the electoral process is a chief civil liberties concern. Counties should be allowed to implement a system of public financing for elected members of the county boards of education to encourage full participation by all citizens and ensure a full range of public debate on these important positions.

How Have Counties Responded to Public Campaign Financing Options in Chapter 419 of 2013?

- Montgomery County, Howard County, and Prince George's County have enacted, in 2014, 2017, and 2018, respectively, local laws establishing public campaign financing systems for county executive and county council offices.
- Montgomery County's system was in effect for the 2018 elections, Howard County's system will first be in effect for the 2022 elections, and Prince George's County's system will first be in effect for the 2026 elections.
- In addition, Baltimore City voters approved a charter amendment during the November 2018 election authorizing the mayor and city council to establish a public campaign financing program.
- Baltimore County recently introduced a charter amendment that, if passed, will be on the ballot in 2020.