

BILL: House Bill 97
TITLE: Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)
DATE: January 26, 2021
POSITION: SUPPORT
COMMITTEE: Economic Matters Committee
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the State's local boards of education, supports House Bill 97.

MABE believes the passage of this legislation would establish the Office of Digital Inclusion within the Department of Housing and Community Development and launch a coordinated state and local government initiative to identify and close gaps in access to high speed broadband services for all Marylanders.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a long-documented and persistent inequity affecting students that lack adequate broadband access. Widespread home-based learning has highlighted a long-documented and persistent inequity of students that lack adequate broadband access. This digital divide, commonly known as the homework gap, impacts millions of students across the nations, and families and students in each of Maryland's 24 local jurisdictions and school systems.

The homework gap also impacts some of the most vulnerable students such as those with disabilities and English learners. As the instructional environment for students has shifted from traditional classrooms in school buildings to virtual classrooms, the necessity for each student to have high-quality access to the Internet is imperative. With the current crisis dramatically shifting our children's education to remote and online learning, it has never been more important to address this inequity. However, the homework gap must not be allowed to persist once students return to in-person learning. Broadband access in homes of all students is essential to supporting student learning and enrichment when they are not in school.

MABE supports House Bill 97 as essential to Maryland's efforts to improve necessary high-speed broadband required for twenty-first century learning both when students are school and when they are home. Maryland's local boards of education are also urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Congress to focus on ways to improve the overall connectivity and digital infrastructure for all students and abandon efforts to make connectivity more difficult. Closing the homework gap is a pressing national need that must also be addressed through reforms to federal laws and regulations so that all students have equitable access to Maryland's world class public education system.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on House Bill 97.