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**June 30, 2023**

The Honorable Bill Ferguson  
President of the Maryland Senate  
State House, H-107  
100 State Circle  
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Adrienne Jones  
Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates  
State House, H-101  
100 State Circle  
Annapolis, MD 21401

President Ferguson and Speaker Jones:

I am writing to provide you with an update on the progress of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) under my leadership and in collaboration with the State Board of Education over the past two years, and to reiterate my unwavering commitment to a collaborative partnership with the Maryland General Assembly (MGA). I believe that such a partnership is integral to our shared objective of realizing the full promise of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future and elevating the educational outcomes for all Maryland students, particularly those who have historically been underserved. As I delve into the details of our progress and the path ahead, I want to acknowledge upfront the recent claims that have surfaced about the Department in the press. I see these headlines as well – allegations of a toxic work environment, high staff turnover, and other challenges. I want to address these issues transparently, honestly, and supported by data.

We are in the midst of implementing the comprehensive Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, a landmark educational reform effort. The changes mandated by the Blueprint are significant - they require a shift from the status quo and existing systems. Change is never easy; it's often uncomfortable, and not everyone is going to like it. But educational leaders know that this shift, backed by evidence-based practices, is necessary to reach a higher level of performance and accountability. For example, revamping and elevating MSDE grant programs to align with the Blueprint, implementing rigorous accountability and monitoring, and eliminating past audit findings is crucial to me – and since I am ultimately held responsible for program success and proper accountability, I must remain committed to that process even when there is pressure to placate, look away, or absolve legacy ineffective practices. We know that better and more equitable outcomes are necessary; we cannot keep doing the same things and expect a different result.

Recognizing the complexities and realities of systemic change, I acknowledge some missteps and frustrations; amidst the speed of MSDE’s changes the Department has not always been proactive in communicating that change to our long-standing Department partners. My commitment to due diligence, to exploring every aspect of how MSDE operates, and transforming it for the better remains steadfast but I also know that (and I commit to) better engaging more directly our long-standing Department partners. We appreciate and value the role of advocates and community-based organizations. They play an integral part in supporting MSDE's work streams and offer valuable insights and perspectives. I must also say that while I acknowledge some missteps in proactively communicating changes as we work to transform the Department, broad, blanket assertions about our work remain untrue.

Against this backdrop of transformation, I want to address our staffing situation, backed by the data. But before I do that, I want to take a moment to express my profound gratitude and respect for the more than 1,100 dedicated individuals who comprise our team at MSDE. Day in and day out, they contribute to the Department's mission with their hard work, passion, and commitment to serving the children, families, and adults with disabilities of Maryland. Our staff forms the backbone of MSDE, and it's important to remember and celebrate their efforts, particularly during this period of intense transformation.

I inherited 188 vacancies at the start of my term. After the State's hiring freeze was lifted, the number of vacancies within MSDE reached a high of 258. Since then, we have cut the vacancy rate by over 50% while simultaneously elevating the quality of MSDE personnel. The data speak for themselves. **As far back as we can get data, MSDE is now under 100 vacancies for the first time in at least a decade.** MSDE vacancies as of:

- 7/1/2013 – 119
- 7/1/2014 – 145
- 7/1/2015 – 128
- 7/1/2016 – 148
- 7/1/2017 – 157
- 7/1/2018 – 163
- 7/1/2019 – 133
- 7/1/2020 – 146
- 7/1/2021 – 188
- 8/1/2022 – 258
- **7/1/2023 - 96**

This is not a coincidence, but the result of concerted efforts to recruit and retain the right talent. With regard to the questions about a toxic work environment, I point again to the data - **the MSDE turnover rate has dropped from 22.8% on July 1, 2021, to 14.7% on May 23, 2023, a reduction of over 35%.** In addition, I have actively worked to (and been able to) promote over 35 regular employees to higher-level positions, reclassify 47% of employees in the Division of Rehabilitation Services to a higher-grade position, and ensure that more than 40% of staff, particularly those in lower grades in the Division of Rehabilitation Services and in the Office of Child Care within the Division of Early Childhood, received pay increases beyond statewide raises. These are some of our lowest paid staff yet those who have statewide impact and interface directly with the public. The result has been to nearly zero vacancies in child care licensing specialists and vocational rehabilitation specialists. Incoming and promoted staff at all levels of MSDE, particularly in middle and upper management, are now more representative of the communities we serve.

Our responsibility is to build an organization that is structurally sound, one where MSDE's collective wisdom does not reside solely with a few individuals but is embedded within the very infrastructure of MSDE. This period of transition has thus offered MSDE the opportunity to bring in new energy, to reframe old narratives, and to ensure that our institutional knowledge is dynamic, forward-looking, and always in service of improving outcomes for Maryland's children. This period of change is not just about personnel shifts; it's about shifting paradigms. This is not a loss; it is a restoration.

As we look to the future, we remain committed to diligent oversight of our operations and ensuring compliance in all aspects of our work. We owe it to our students and to you, our partners in the Maryland General Assembly, to hold ourselves to the highest standards. For that reason, MSDE is expanding its legislative affairs office to make the whole of MSDE a resource to the MGA.

We will be here to engage the MGA, to provide answers and resources, and, if needed, offer constructive feedback on ideas that MSDE believes might not be grounded in effective practices. I am resolute in evidence-based research and policy strategies that are likely to be implemented with fidelity and drive outcomes for kids. But we can disagree without being disagreeable. Do not mistake my passion for a desire to not engage in a two-way conversation. My passion is just that – a deeply personal commitment rooted in a lifelong calling to serve and in my own experiences as a student growing up attending high-poverty schools and helping my family navigate government assistance. As a Muslim person of color, I am acutely aware that I occupy a unique position in leading a State system that has seen very limited diversity at its helm. I appreciate the amplified scrutiny that comes with this role and embrace it as part of my commitment to driving change.

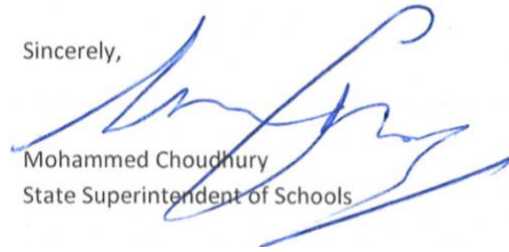
**If there has ever been a moment where my passion in any way offended, confused, frustrated, or caused you pause – I am sorry, that was not and is not my intent.**

I look forward to ongoing collaboration and dialogue as we continue to transform MSDE into the State Education Agency and education thought leader that Maryland deserves. We've taken big steps forward these last two years and I will continue to do my best each day to earn and keep your trust. As we build this trust, it is vital that we ensure an atmosphere of transparency and accuracy. In an era characterized by truth decay and attacks on the fundamental pillars of educational institutions, it is critical to address and correct any misrepresentations about the Department. I hold myself accountable to uphold the truth and confront any inaccuracies, always committed to doing so with dignity, respect, and honesty. This is my promise to you, as we work together in advancing our shared mission of service.

I invite you to discuss these developments further, to understand the changes we have made, and to jointly identify future opportunities for progress. MSDE is open to all of the Maryland General Assembly and is here to provide the research, thought partnership, and expertise on which the MGA relies for its important role of policy making and oversight. In the coming weeks, I will proactively reach out to you and MSDE's doors will continue to remain open for direct meetings with MGA leadership and membership. I am confident in the skills and dedication of our team, and I'd be thrilled to welcome you to MSDE, so that you can witness firsthand the incredible work being done by our team. Please consider this an open invitation for you to spend time with us and see the strides we are making in real-time.

I have endeavored, with the support of the State Board of Education, to revitalize a Department beset by legacy issues, while simultaneously driving an ambitious agenda for transformation. As I acknowledge the magnitude of the challenges I inherited, and the monumental task we still face, I also want to be more proactive in communicating progress, updates, and changes early – and often. This is about getting it right for every child, no matter what it takes. Please take the time to read about some of our progress below. I wish to assure you of our unyielding commitment to transparency, accountability, and most importantly, the well-being and success of every child in Maryland. Thank you for your time, and for your unwavering commitment to advancing the educational outcomes of all Maryland students.

Sincerely,



Mohammed Choudhury  
State Superintendent of Schools

c: Wes Moore, Governor  
Guy Guzzone, Chair, Senate Budget and Taxation Committee  
Ben Barnes, Chair, House Appropriations Committee  
Brian Feldman, Chair, Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
Vanessa Atterbeary, Chair, House Ways and Means Committee  
Nancy King, Chair, Education, Business, and Administration Subcommittee  
Stephanie Smith, Chair, Education and Economic Development Subcommittee  
Mary Washington, Chair, Education Subcommittee  
Eric Ebersole, Chair, Education Subcommittee  
Julie Palakovich Carr, Chair, Early Childhood Subcommittee

## Changes at MSDE – Then and Now

At the start of my term as State Superintendent of Schools, MSDE operations were characterized by numerous challenges, each of which directly or indirectly impacted the Department's ability to serve the students, families, and adults with disabilities of Maryland effectively. In essence, the challenges we encountered were both systemic and symptomatic of an organizational culture resistant to change. It was clear that a focused and aggressive approach was necessary to address these issues and set the Department on a path of transformation.

Our commitment to this goal is evident in the concrete steps we have taken over the past two years. Notable strides have been made in revamping programming, strengthening operations, and invigorating policy development. We are particularly proud of the successes achieved through the Maryland Leads program and the modifications to the Child Care Scholarship program. Additionally, our proactive involvement in legislative affairs, such as the shaping of the 2023 Multilingualism is an Asset Act, underscores our dedication to informed policy-making that directly benefits our diverse student population.

### Operations and Infrastructure

- **Then.** On the human resources front, we were dealing with an absence of hiring and retention protocols and procedures, resulting in a dearth of talent and high staff turnover. There was, without exaggeration, no standardized Department mechanism for implementing candidate evaluations, communicating hiring information to hiring managers, utilizing high-quality interview protocols, collecting candidate ratings, and moving candidates through the hiring process to fill vacancies. Lower salaries, limited opportunities for professional growth, and a hiring freeze had led to 188 vacancies when I began. This absence of a comprehensive recruitment plan, coupled with an underutilized Performance Evaluation Process (PEP), inhibited our ability to ensure candidate quality and hindered our department-wide retention efforts. MSDE likewise had nonexistent service level agreements for customer interaction, further compounding these Department issues with external stakeholders, including the Maryland General Assembly.
  - **Now.** The human resources successes discussed earlier rely on core Department efforts in talent and recruitment – from redesigning how and where MSDE recruits to reorganizing internal employee relations. MSDE's new, internal, talent hub ensures all programs rely on (and have access to) a consistent approach to the hiring process from interview through orientation. Talent coordinators who work with each Office's or Division's assigned talent partners set up interviews, provide access to hiring documents and protocols. Talent partners meet with assigned programs, discuss employee hiring needs, support accurate processing of personnel forms, job descriptions, and pour over resumes across the Department to identify top talent.

- **Then.** The financial and procedural challenges were equally alarming. Revenue allocation issues dating back to 1996, a more than 10-year-old chart of accounts, more than four years of rolled-over budgets, a nonexistent position control system, and a backlog of more than 2,500 invoices were emblematic of a lax fiscal accountability culture. This was further evidenced by a lack of systems for collecting and processing invoices, leading to grant late payments. There were inconsistent and sometimes nonexistent, fully decentralized grant policies and monitoring protocols, which had resulted in unspent federal funds, poor and inconsistent grant monitoring, questionable and persistent direct grant making to grantees absent monitoring and accountability for compliance and for impact, and Office of Legislative Audit findings. MSDE had, in so doing, failed to expand the tent of eligible grantees and consequently locked out potential grantees and emerging, innovative groups and ideas capable of advancing outcomes for children.
- **Then.** The Department's infrastructure was in dire need of attention. The facilities across regions (including regional child care licensing facilities and Division of Rehabilitation Services facilities) were not just unvisited but also left unattended, lacking basic IT infrastructure. MSDE staff and headquarters were also inadequately equipped for information technology. This was an era when digital transformation was no longer a luxury, but a necessity for efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. The broken Child Care Scholarship payment process and the ineffective allocation of one-time pandemic resources, such as the first round of the child care stabilization grants, were glaring signs of systemic inefficiencies. Further, the Department had out of date retroactive contracts, no active contract monitoring, no contract service-level agreement monitoring, and no enforcement of existing contract provisions.
  - **Now.** Over the last two years, the Maryland State Department of Education has demonstrated significant progress by strategically addressing longstanding operational inefficiencies and modernizing key areas of operation. From streamlining procurement processes to reforming the Office of Information Technology and launching a brand-new [Office of Grants Administration and Compliance](#), these restorative efforts have led to improved accountability and greater operational effectiveness. Coupled with our forward-thinking initiatives like the design of an annual technology refresh program and the launch of the [MSDE Business Hub](#) and the [initial redesign of our website](#), we are not just overcoming past challenges but embracing a vision of an MSDE equipped for the 21st century - efficient, transparent, and primed to deliver high-quality educational services for Maryland's future.
  - **Now.** This year, MSDE has made notable strides in revamping the [Child Care Scholarship program](#) to enhance its efficiency and impact for Maryland's children, families, and childcare providers. By transitioning to an enrollment-based payment system and introducing a first-in-the-nation approach to using advance payments, the administration has managed to address significant challenges such as payment delays and multiple attendance verification audits, thus providing a lifeline to providers who operate on a payment-to-payment basis. These improvements have been met with widespread enthusiasm from child care providers across the state, signaling the administration's unwavering commitment to nurturing the welfare and educational growth of Maryland's youngest residents, particularly amidst the strains of the ongoing pandemic recovery. MSDE also released the new Child Care Scholarship program family portal, allowing for online submission and tracking of scholarship applications. Released just this spring (2023), the portal already has 14,943 portal accounts. Between April 28th and June 16th, 73% of applications came through the new portal.

- **Now.** In the unsolicited words of Ruby Daniels, President of the Maryland State Family Child Care Association (MSFCCA):

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for improving the CCS payment system. Uphill battle but MSDE prevailed. Thank you so much" - June 22, 2023

- **Now.** In addition to revamping the above, MSDE seeded much-needed child care infrastructure investments via its [Maryland Rebuilds](#) program. Maryland Rebuilds is centered around six high-leverage strategies identified in partnership with Maryland's childcare community and designed to transform early childhood systems in Maryland: Expanding Access to Quality Child Care; Early Learning Models of Excellence; Expanding Mental Health Supports and Services; Growing a Highly Effective Childcare Workforce; Boosting Family Childcare; and Advancing a Coordinated Prekindergarten Enrollment System. This program and its grantees are now fast at work. For example, the [Maryland Early Ed Corps](#) at the University of Maryland's Center for Early Childhood Education and Intervention (CECEI) will address teacher shortages in "child care deserts" where centers and staff are in short supply in geographic clusters around the state, from the Eastern Shore and Southern Maryland to northern and western regions. Four cohorts of 35 to 37 non-degree-seeking early childhood teacher candidates, many of them recent high school graduates or parents of young children, will participate. The CECEI will emphasize recruiting new teachers from underrepresented groups in these same communities.

#### Driving Student Outcomes and Narrowing Opportunity and Achievement Gaps

- The [Maryland Leads](#) program, recognized by U.S. Secretary of Education Cardona and the United States Department of Education, has wrapped up its first full year of implementation, demonstrating encouraging results across all strategic areas. With over \$175 million in ESSER funding, the program seeks to overcome learning loss, accelerate learning, close opportunity and achievement gaps, and deliver targeted support to historically underserved students, with focal points like "Grow Your Own" staffing programs and curriculum and instruction based on the Science of Reading showing significant promise. [Initial LEA reading data](#) (view an additional presentation here – [Montgomery County Public Schools and St. Mary's County Public Schools](#)) already show substantial growth. Under the Maryland Leads initiative, school districts are being empowered to scale evidence-based programs and invest in sustainable talent pipelines, showcasing early signs of transformative change within Maryland's K-12 education system.
- The Blueprint for Maryland's Future requires the State to ensure that, by 2030-2031, 45% of high school graduates will have completed the high-school level of a registered apprenticeship program and/or received an industry-recognized occupational credential. The [Maryland Works](#) program, recognized by U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh will set the tone and lay the groundwork for achieving this goal. For the [participating LEA awardees](#), if the program achieves the success criteria identified in awarded LEA applications, the Maryland Works infrastructure should generate more than 3,000 new apprenticeship opportunities and result in the additional of more than 400 new businesses partnering with local education agencies. Maryland Works would effectively increase apprenticeship opportunities to 30 times the current number of participating students in Maryland Works LEAs.

- As the Superintendent of the Maryland State Department of Education, I have made it my mission to bring to the forefront those uncomfortable issues that have long been swept under the rug, but issues which we must confront if we are to genuinely serve all our students. [The Reducing Overidentification in Special Education \(ROSE\)](#) grant program is one such issue. Overidentification in special education has been a persistent problem in our education system. Too often, students who are disproportionately likely to be misidentified as having intellectual and/or emotional disabilities - such as African American students, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students - end up in restrictive classroom environments that do not serve their educational needs. Rather than receiving the appropriate support and acceleration they require within the general education classroom, these students are held back, further widening the educational gap. This is a deeply uncomfortable truth, but one we must face head-on if we are to affect meaningful change. This truth, like those about persistent segregation by race and class, are likewise difficult but important truths we must acknowledge and to which we must attend. To care about special education means to care about being certain in who and for what children become eligible for special education services. Anything less is an abdication of our responsibility as policymakers, advocates, educators, and humans.
- Just last week, MSDE and the State Board of Education announced - in partnership with the Maryland Department of Service and Civic Innovation, the Governor, and in joining President Biden's [National Partnership for Student Success](#) - a comprehensive statewide program to address the single digit math proficiency rates across Maryland, rates that were declining even before the pandemic. The [Maryland Tutoring Corps](#) has the potential to serve more than 60,000 students and recruit more than 800 tutors in the initial grant phase. The grant program's purpose is to seed the establishment of a permanent tutoring corps program, one that is positioned to sustainably recruit, train, deploy, and support tutors to work directly with students who are not proficient in math.
- MSDE has done all this while at the same time meeting all [Blueprint](#) Implementation deadlines and completing all workgroups and reports with a focus on quality and rigor. If you have not already, I welcome you to read the [Blueprint Implementation Plan](#) MSDE submitted to the Accountability and Implementation Board. MSDE designed a Blueprint Implementation Plan template and Criteria for Success for LEA Implementation Plans, which were unanimously adopted with marginal changes from the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB).

#### MSDE Re-engaging in Education Leadership

- In my administration, the Maryland State Department of Education has reestablished itself as a proactive thought leader, infusing insights from research, best practices, and Maryland's unique educational landscape into its work. MSDE has reembraced an active role in the legislative process, providing informed perspectives on numerous proposed legislations. Notably, our collaborative effort in shaping many bills in 2023 - including the [Promise Schools legislation](#), a Legislative Black Caucus 2023 priority bill focused on persistently low-performing schools and the [2023 Multilingualism is an Asset Act](#) (in conjunction with the Latino Caucus and 41 Delegates), based on recommendations from our English Learner Workgroup - underscores our commitment to informed policy-making that positively impacts Maryland's diverse student population.



- This year, MSDE heeded the MGA’s call to identify and recommend a new system for identifying and measuring concentrated poverty called [Maryland Neighborhood Tiers](#). Maryland Neighborhood Tiers, [subsequently proposed in House Bill 1211](#), go beyond traditional poverty measures, taking into account the number, concentration, and depth of poverty among students, allowing us to better identify and provide the resources necessary to address their unique needs. This innovative approach marks a significant step toward equitable education, and one we hope the State considers adopting to make Maryland a policy leader in the drive to tackle educational disparities and ensure every student, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, has an equal chance at success.

### MSDE Engaging Marylanders

- Our determination to understand and serve the needs of our communities extends beyond surveys and roundtables. I have endeavored to spend an unprecedented amount of time within our school systems. Each year thus far, I have made it a priority to visit and shadow students and leadership in all local education agencies, spending full days within schools and districts. **So far, I have had 48 student shadows, 20 principal shadows and 47 Superintendent shadows totaling more than 235 hours in LEA schools across all grade bands and across a diversity of Maryland communities.** These are not brief, ceremonial visits with press events, but meaningful engagements where the focus is on the students, educators, and administrators. By truly shadowing - participating in classes, joining in activities, and interacting directly with all stakeholders - I have gained profound insights that shape and continuously inform our Department strategies and priorities. There is still much to learn, and we remain committed to this in-depth, on-the-ground engagement. It not only grounds our understanding of the educational landscape in Maryland but helps ensure that our initiatives and decisions are rooted in the realities of our school communities.
- The State Board of Education and MSDE have undertaken unprecedented and [extensive engagement](#). In its construction and rollout of [the State Board of Education's and MSDE's Strategic Plan](#), for example, MSDE collected feedback from close to 30,000 respondents, made more 35,240 connections with Marylanders, held more than 30 roundtables with more than 400 participants and more than 40 hours of in-depth dialogue, had more than 6,950 event participants, and more than 1,600 listening session participants. MSDE also conducted [design charettes](#) with Maryland stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and community members across Maryland to develop, refine, and finalize the flagship programs, initiatives, and strategies that will ensure the success of strategic plan priorities and enablers.
- MSDE conducted [regional data gallery walks](#) for all twenty-four local education agencies to support critical and thoughtful engagement of LEA data with LEA staff and LEA Board participation from all Maryland LEAs. These data walks included hundreds of posters of data related to key State and LEA initiatives to better equip and support LEAs in making data-informed decisions in shifting toward Blueprint implementation and in identifying areas of need and focus.