

To: To All Interested Parties
From: Coalition of Maryland Advocates for Public Education
Subject: Biased and Misleading Maryland Education Credit Coalition Poll

Last week, the Maryland Education Credit Coalition—made up primarily by private schools in Maryland—circulated a poll done on their behalf by OpinionWorks, a polling firm based in Annapolis. The statewide survey, conducted over a two-week period in late August, showed support for the Maryland Education Credit (known more widely as BOAST) by a 63% to 28% margin. However, this support came only after the following description of BOAST was read to respondents:

“The proposal would create the Maryland Education Credit. It would financially assist lower- and middle-income students and their families through donations from businesses that would be encouraged by the tax credit. The business donations would be managed by nonprofit organizations that provide assistance to both public and nonpublic school students. Public school students would receive assistance to cover things such as books, tutoring, or special education services. Nonpublic school students would receive scholarships to help pay for tuition. Nonpublic schools that charge higher tuition would not be eligible for the program.”

This language is very similar to the messaging that advocates for BOAST use in their lobbying efforts in Annapolis. Yet, it does not articulate the alternative perspective that such a proposal comes with a cost to public schools and their students.

Messaging Matters

Messaging makes all the difference in public opinion polls. That’s why when the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA) polled voters about BOAST in 2015, they asked three different questions to fully understand public sentiment. In May, MSEA’s commissioned poll—conducted by GBA Strategies—asked voters the neutrally messaged question:

Neutral

Would you favor or oppose the use of taxpayer dollars to fund scholarships for students who attend private schools?

Favor:	39
Oppose:	58
Don’t Know/Refused:	4
Net:	-19

In order to understand how voters view the two sides of the debate around BOAST, MSEA then asked voters follow-up questions in September using language from opponents and language from supporters:

Coalition of Maryland Advocates for Public Education

Would you favor or oppose a proposal to divert taxpayer dollars from public schools in order to subsidize private schools?

Favor:	19
Oppose:	78
Don't Know/Refused:	3
Net:	-59

Maryland Education Credit Coalition

Would you favor or oppose a tax credit program that funds private school scholarships for low-income students?

Favor:	69
Oppose:	27
Don't Know/Refused:	5
Net:	+42

The polling methodology is the same in each case, with 600 randomly-selected registered voters weighted to account for accurate representations of geography and political affiliation. In all three polls, there was a margin of error of four percentage points.

BOAST Has Broad Opposition from Voters

This polling data clearly shows that while the OpinionWorks survey is useful in message development for the Maryland Education Credit Coalition, it is not a neutral display of public opinion on BOAST. Not only do a majority (58%) of registered voters oppose a neutral explanation of BOAST, there is far more energy on the opposition side: 41% of voters strongly oppose BOAST, more than all voters who support it. This is consistent throughout the state, with margins of opposition reaching double-digits in every region of Maryland.

This opposition holds true along political and racial lines. BOAST is even opposed by Republicans with just 47% in favor of the program and 49% in opposition. There is no statistically significant difference between Democrats and Independents, who both have 60% opposition. There is also no difference between white (39% support, 58% oppose) and African-American respondents (39% support, 57% oppose).

Opposition is also stronger among parents of school-aged children. Only 39% of respondents with school-aged kids support BOAST, with 60% opposed. This is especially true of African-American parents (who oppose the proposed program

by a 27 percentage-point margin) and mothers (who oppose the proposed program by a 38 percentage-point margin).

Lack of School Choice is Not a Top Education Concern for Voters

Opposition to BOAST most likely stems from the fact that the vast majority of voters do not identify lack of school choice as a top concern facing K-12 education in Maryland. In MSEA’s polls—both in May and September—lack of school choice finished dead last behind six other options for top education concern, including: too much focus on standardized testing, cuts to funding, lack of parental involvement, class size, poverty and hunger, and difficulty getting good teachers. In fact, 89% of voters in the first poll and 90% of voters in the second poll did not believe lack of school choice was a top K-12 education concern. Instead, voters are looking for elected officials and education leaders to improve public schools by reducing standardized testing, increasing funding, and supporting ways to boost parental involvement.

School Choice NOT a Top Concern for Voters

Which TWO of the following do you think are the biggest concerns facing K-through-12 education in Maryland?

	Registered Voters May 2015	Registered Voters Sept 2015
Too much focus on standardized testing	40	43
Cuts to funding	32	37
Lack of parental involvement	37	30
Class Size	24	24
Poverty and hunger	22	22
Difficulty getting good teachers	17	20
Lack of school choice	11	10

BOAST Does Not Help Low-Income Families and Students

The biased support in the Maryland Education Credit Coalition poll relies on the misleading argument that BOAST will help low-income students. The OpinionWorks memo itself clearly explains that BOAST support relies on this premise. They write, “In explaining their support in an open-ended way, voters focused on the financial help the Education Credit will provide to lower-income students, and the better access it could provide children to the highest quality

education.” They continue, “Responding to closed-ended questioning, one key factor rose to the top of those that influence support for this proposal: helping to break the cycle of poverty.”

Unfortunately, this is precisely what makes the OpinionWorks polling so biased. There is no definitive proof that BOAST, if passed, would benefit low-income students or help break the cycle of poverty. If anything, there is very reliable evidence that BOAST will primarily support private schools with no or very few low-income students.

In order for the program to help low-income families, it has to encourage more low-income families who are currently in public schools to attend private schools with the help of scholarships. But in Georgia, where BOAST was enacted, this never happened. A recent report by the Southern Education Foundation found that most of the students receiving financial support to attend private schools in Georgia did not come from public schools. From 2007, the year before the program was enacted, through 2009, private school enrollment increased by only one-third of one percent in the metropolitan counties that included most of the private schools in the scholarship program. Instead, the taxpayer dollars went to families who could already afford a private school education.

But we do not have to look outside of Maryland to find an example of how BOAST would primarily benefit private schools with no students. Maryland has provided public funding for private school textbooks (and more recently technology) for more than a decade—a program that is always sold by private school advocates as a way to support low-income students who need help affording up-to-date learning materials. However, in fiscal year 2014, just \$700,000 of the roughly \$5.7 million given out in total went to schools with any students who qualify for free and reduced meals (FARMs). That means 87.7% of funding went to schools that had no low-income students. In fact, just 22 of the 343 private schools that get public taxpayer dollars through the program have any low-income students. Should BOAST pass, it is reasonable to expect that the same lack of support for low-income students would be seen a decade into its existence.

This was not in the description given to respondents in the Maryland Education Credit Coalition poll. Instead, voters were given misleading talking points disguised as facts—resulting in biased responses and false support. Their poll should be disregarded as misinformation. Maryland continues to demonstrate little public support for BOAST.