



Agudath Israel of Maryland 2023 Legislative Review

The 2023 Legislative Session of Maryland General Assembly began as a new four-year term for state elected officials on January 11th - with dozens of new lawmakers, several new committee chairs, and a new governor-elect waiting to be inaugurated. A week later, Governor Wes Moore took office. Not only did Governor Moore move into a new office in Annapolis this session, but so did Agudah Maryland. For the very first time in our 15 years working the Maryland General Assembly, in an effort to fulfill our community's legislative duties to their fullest extent, we opened up the Annapolis office of Agudah Maryland.

Save our "BOOST" – Since it was created in 2016, the BOOST (Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today) Scholarship Program has provided low- and middle-income Maryland families with 20,000 scholarships totaling \$55 million to attend a nonpublic school. Of that total, nearly 27% has gone to

Jewish day school families. While the program was not created by Governor Larry Hogan, it most certainly grew and flourished under his leadership for the last seven years. A popular program across the state and the political spectrum, support for BOOST was certainly a talking point of candidates vying to be MD's next governor. While most candidates in the field supported its continuation and some even said they'd expand it, one notable candidate said he did not support BOOST, but would not end it just yet. That candidate was Wes Moore. As such, there was serious concern going into session that BOOST would be in jeopardy under the new Moore administration.

Governor Moore's budget came out three days after his inauguration. True to his word, it proposed a 20% cut to the program's allocation (from \$10 million to \$8 million) and it restricted all new family applicants, thus beginning a phaseout that would eliminate the program over the next several years.

The fate of the BOOST program became one of the more prominent session conversations in Annapolis and across all media platforms in Maryland. Newspaper articles, TV news broadcasts, and talk radio shows all covered the BOOST conversation.

After budget hearings in both House and Senate, it became apparent that the Senate, behind the leadership of President Bill Ferguson, was committed to keeping the program funded and strong. Their version of the budget included \$2 million of additional funds to restore the \$10 million allocation of Governor Hogan's previous budgets and the removal of the phaseout language (courtesy of an amendment by Senator Shelly Hettleman). The House, on the other hand, passed Governor Moore's BOOST cuts in their version of the budget.

The annual nonpublic school student rally, hosted each year by Maryland CAPE (our state chapter of the Council for American Private Education, that I chair) took place after a two-year COVID hiatus and drew several hundred young advocates to Annapolis. Their message was conveyed quite clearly: “Save the BOOST program!”

With session winding down the two conflicting budgets were sent to Budget Conference Committee. Tensions in Annapolis rose once again as the “inexplicably controversial allocation of funds for low-income children wishing to attend a private school” took center stage. Both House and Senate dug in their heels to maintain their respective versions of the budget. A robust grassroots effort was undertaken by advocates facilitating huge numbers of phone calls and emails to the legislative offices of the conferees. At the same time, Marylanders of all levels of political power and influence were asked to weigh in to lend support for BOOST. In Annapolis, Delegate Dalya Attar secured a crucial meeting with Speaker Adrienne Jones where she and Delegates Sandy Rosenberg and Jon Cardin pressed the Speaker to soften the position of the House conferees in favor of the children who rely on the BOOST program.

A compromise was reached by the conference committee on Friday afternoon, just ahead of Monday’s budget deadline. The BOOST program.... SURVIVED! Of greatest significance, the phaseout language was removed. Instead of the full \$10 million program allocation, the funding was limited to \$9 million for scholarships. (However, a rollover of half a million dollars of unspent funds is available from the current year, so the loss in scholarship dollars is only \$500K – or approximately 150 student scholarships.) As part of the compromise, an additional allocation of \$2.5 million for BOOST-participating schools to use for nursing/medical costs or safety improvements was made.

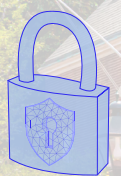
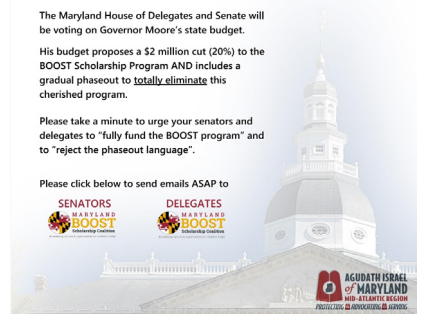
More from the budget – The budget included additional nonpublic school allocations: the textbook and technology program (\$6 million) and the aging schools facilities grant (\$3.5 million) were both level-funded as they have been in the past. An additional allocation of \$3.5 million was designated for nonpublic schools for educational purposes (tutoring or student enrichment) from leftover COVID relief funds from the federal government.

The two safety grants for schools (\$3 million, a \$1 million increase) and nonprofit organizations (\$5 million) that are deemed to be at risk of a hate crime (and thus only available to a much smaller list of entities) add an additional \$8 million for security improvements, equipment, or personnel.

School-focused legislation

Codifying BOOST – While battling to save BOOST on the budget front, we once again put forth significant effort to make the BOOST program permanent and codified in Maryland law.

TAKE ACTION NOW!

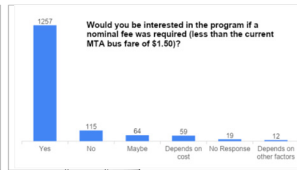
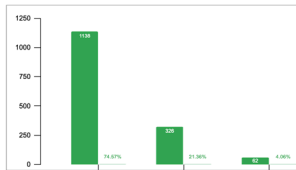
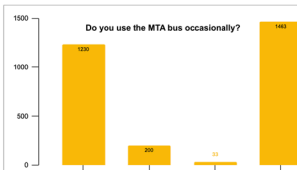
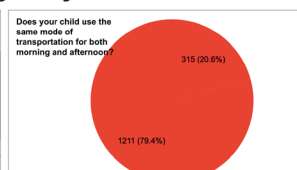
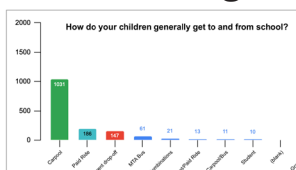
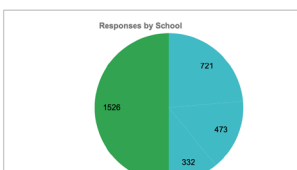


Several bills that included BOOST language were introduced and several behind-the-scenes solutions were pursued. Ultimately, the efforts at session's end to secure an acceptable budget compromise for BOOST overtook the ability to pursue the permanent solution. Our hopes are that the efforts expended and the outcome achieved this year will have put us in a stronger position to accomplish that goal next time around in 2024.

School transportation – Dating back to its founding in 2007, our office has worked extensively on exploring and expanding school transportation options for the community. Through those efforts, the MTA bus program, which had been providing limited school service to our community since the 1960's, was expanded to gradually include more schools, more neighborhoods, a more robust schedule, and a more efficient bus fare system. However, with the community's continuous growth (ka"n) and the occasional challenges with MTA services, we were compelled to conduct a survey to get the pulse of the community on the MTA, and school transportation more generally. The survey of MTA participating schools yielded more than 1,500 responses that showed an overwhelming majority of households opting not to utilize the MTA option and preferring carpool/paid rides/parent drop-off. 75% were "extremely interested" in a yellow school bus option, with 83% of them willing to pay "a reasonable fare" for school busing should the option become available.

In the months leading up to session we worked closely with Delegate Attar and Delegate Dana Stein discussing a variety of ideas in pursuit of a legislative proposal that would create a bus program for nonpublic schools in Maryland. Their extensive efforts included other stakeholders as well as key outreach to legislative leadership that helped develop a bill, with Delegate Attar as sponsor and Delegate Stein as co-sponsor, that would provide a tax credit to parents for the expenses incurred for school transportation costs. While the bill garnered strong interest out of the gate, leadership determined that a taskforce be first enacted to properly study the best approach for such a program. The school bus taskforce bill did indeed pass and we are hopeful that this first step will lead to the passing of a bill next year that will solve - to the greatest extent possible - one of our community's most visible challenges.

School nursing funds – For the last several years, we have been involved in the effort conceived by the OU's Teach Coalition to create a funding program for nonpublic school nurses. Once again, this year we supported a bill that would provide a \$40 per pupil allocation for nursing or other in-school medical costs. While the bill itself did not pass, the efforts proved successful in the



inclusion of nursing and medical costs as an allowable use (together with school security) in the \$2.5 million allocation to nonpublic schools as part of the BOOST budget compromise, as mentioned above.

Maryland 529 – The state’s 529 program figured prominently in the news this year – but not in a manner that had much impact on our community. Major problems were discovered in the administration of the Maryland 529 Prepaid College Trust, NOT the College Investment Program that our households utilize (for the State Contribution ‘Match’), leading the legislature to pass a bill transferring oversight of the 529 program from a board of trustees to the State Treasurer. While families who have invested through the Prepaid College Trust had issues accessing their accounts, those with the College Investment Plan run by T. Rowe Price did not experience any issues. All info regarding utilizing 529 for K-12 benefits, etc., can be found on our 529 webpage.



Beyond nonpublic school advocacy, we were involved in the legislative pursuits of numerous other items during the 90-day session. Among them were:

Hate crimes and Anti-Semitism – With the alarming rise in anti-Semitic activities and incidents - globally and especially locally, several bills to address hate crimes and anti-Semitism were sponsored this session by Delegate Attar and Senator Ben Kramer. Among these bills were both grant programs and those promoting appropriate and effective education – including a bill which made the hate crime grant program for nonprofits into an actual state funding mandate.

All-year Daylight Savings Time – For the last several years we have advocated against a push to end standard time and implement all-year daylight savings time (DST). This pursuit is not limited to Maryland, as this has been taken up on Capitol Hill as well. Two different bills were introduced – one that would tie Maryland to an all-year DST law passed federally and one that would tie Maryland to the same policy if adopted in our regional neighboring states. All-year DST presents serious concerns about child safety (due to early morning darkness), and for religious Jews in particular it would upend the ability to daven shacharis in the earlier morning hours as we are accustomed.



Physician assisted suicide – Since 2016, we have strongly fought the legislative efforts to legalize physician assisted suicide (PAS). This bill was once again introduced and heard this session, but thankfully failed to garner enough support to be brought for a committee vote in either House or Senate.

Child care benefits – Over the last several years our office has been very involved in the expansion of child care programs. In addition to our work on the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future - Pre-K committee, we’ve worked on expanding the eligibility threshold of child care scholarship



households to create wider access across the community. In late 2022, our efforts on behalf of graduate students (a category which includes Kollel avreichem) - who were otherwise ineligible and not considered employed or occupied during the work day - proved successful, as explained in this video. During the session, we supported legislation that strengthens the program by prohibiting the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) from increasing co-payment levels or reducing reimbursement rates or income requirements without oversight approval.

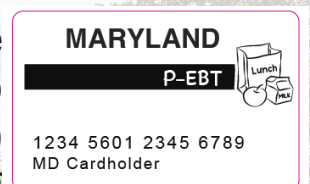
Universal Lunch Program – During the COVID period, the federal government removed all income limit thresholds for free school meal eligibility and funded universal lunches for all meal program-participating schools – public and private. Since the federal COVID funds expired, states across the country have undertaken the pursuit to extend those food benefits to include free meals for all students regardless of income. In Maryland, a broad coalition



of education and child welfare advocates promoted a bill to allow all students to receive free meals. The universal lunch program bill hearing was the first time Agudah Maryland sat on the same witness panel testifying in support of legislation with the state's teacher's union and public school lobbies. The bill with its enormous fiscal note did not pass this year, but will no doubt be reintroduced next session.

Human Composting – The heavy focus our office has on matters of kavod hameis via our work with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner merged with our legislative focus this session in a bizarre fashion. A bill to legalize the alternative burial process known as “human composting” passed the House, but did not move in the Senate. The deceased is placed into a special container filled with soil and undergoes an advanced natural decomposition process that is completed after 45 days. The soil is then given back to the family for their use. This environmentally friendly alternative is becoming popular in states across the country and will no doubt become a headache for those trying to uphold kavod hameis in the future.

P-EBT Reimbursement – During COVID, low-income households eligible for SNAP food benefits received additional food purchasing funds to their accounts through the P-EBT (Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer) program. Unfortunately, a large number of Maryland families, including many within our community, became victims of EBT fraud over the past year, finding their accounts hacked and funds emptied. Immediately after the initial fraud discovery, our office engaged with the Maryland Department of Human Services to bring the matter forward on behalf of many of the affected families. We were pleased to see that the Moore Administration allocated funds to allow these households to recover their loss. A bill was passed this session expanding the eligibility period for reimbursement, in addition to mandating stricter measures to prevent such theft from occurring in future. More information about recovering stolen EBT funds can be found [here](#).



Acknowledgements – I sincerely thank the many members of the Maryland General Assembly

(and their dedicated staffs) with whom we closely work during the session – and before and after it. Their dedication to the households and community members in their districts is quite admirable and the friendship they display to us is ever appreciated. Despite having our own office in Annapolis this year as mentioned earlier, we still spent plenty of time in the legislative offices of Delegate Attar in the House and Senator Hettleman in the Senate. We greatly appreciate the gracious hospitality displayed by their dedicated staff members.

For the majority of our legislative agenda, we work closely each year with a strong team of similar-minded advocates – among whom is the Maryland Catholic Conference, the Baltimore Jewish Council, the JCRC, and Teach Maryland. Many tense hours are spent in the Annapolis trenches and without that shared trust and teamwork, our successes would be far more limited.

With so many extra hours this session spent in Annapolis and with the work output of Agudah Maryland always increasing, the role of our associate director, Avi Lencz, was so much more vital. He kept the Pikesville office staffed and focused on the countless non-legislative items that we address, in addition to his legislative policy work. Mrs. Chani Vilner kept the technical and logistical aspects of the office in order, and our law school student intern, Akiva Gottlieb, provided helpful research and input on a variety of topics that came our way during the last several months.

Lastly... please regularly check out our website for an abundance of helpful info to the households and institutions of our community. There are resources there for those seeking to apply for BOOST scholarships, those looking to utilize 529 tuition related benefits, or those looking to receive child care scholarships, as well as all of the security grant programs that your shuls and other nonprofits may be able to access.

Wishing you and yours all the best.



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