



**Accountability & Implementation Board**

**Fiscal Year 2025 Operating Budget**

**Response to Department of Legislative Services Analysis**

**Isiah Leggett, Chair**

**Rachel Hise, Executive Director**

**Senate Budget and Taxation Committee**

**Education, Business and Administration Subcommittee**

**Chair Nancy J. King**

**February 16, 2024**

**House Appropriations Committee**

**Education and Economic Development Subcommittee**

**Chair Stephanie Smith**

**February 19, 2024**

The Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) appreciates the opportunity to appear before the budget subcommittee to discuss the Department of Legislative Services' (DLS) analysis of the fiscal 2025 budget and to respond to the requested comments contained within. We thank our analyst, Laura Hyde, for her hard work in providing a thorough analysis and acknowledgement of our efforts throughout. The AIB supports the Governor's FY 2025 allowance.

The AIB is focused on supporting successful implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future with fidelity. Working in partnership and collaboration with the Maryland State Board/Department of Education, local education agencies (LEAs), county governments, and other State and local partners, the

AIB is committed to achieving the expected outcomes of the Blueprint. To address one of the fundamental skills that students need to be college and career ready - to read proficiently - the AIB and State Board/Department of Education have jointly developed an early literacy initiative to support science of reading instruction in our elementary schools.

In the second full year of Blueprint implementation, we are pleased to report that progress is happening. More 3- and 4-year olds are enrolled in high quality, full-day Pre-Kindergarten; more teachers are pursuing and earning National Board Certification; career ladders are being developed in partnership with local teachers' unions; middle and high school students are receiving career coaching led by local workforce development boards to help them explore their career interests and select a career pathway; more high school students are earning college credits and participating in CTE programs, including apprenticeships; and more community schools are serving students living in concentrated poverty. As we move into the next phase of Blueprint implementation, this progress will accelerate and begin to produce results in improved student outcomes such as increasing numbers of: kindergarteners coming to school prepared; 3rd graders reading proficiently; 10th graders mastering Algebra I; and students leaving high school with the fundamental knowledge and skills necessary for college and career.

Over the past year, the AIB reviewed the initial Blueprint implementation plans submitted by State (5) and local education agencies (24) as well as career counseling agreements (24) submitted in 2023. The AIB provided significant feedback to LEAs and State agencies regarding their plans, including areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. All LEA plans and four State plans have been approved by AIB to date. The AIB adopted the Updated Blueprint Comprehensive Plan (BCP) in August 2023, including identifying output and outcome measures to track the implementation progress. The Outcome Measures Workgroup continues to meet to refine the identified measures and recommend targets for AIB approval. The AIB, in collaboration with MSDE, also significantly revised both the process and the "template" (now a guide) for the 2024 LEA Blueprint plans to streamline the process and provide LEAs with more opportunities to share their innovative policies and plans to implement the Blueprint. Links to these materials can be found on the AIB website here: <https://aib.maryland.gov/Pages/Blueprint-plans.aspx#>. Hard copies of the Updated BCP are available to the public at the State House Information Desk and via Google form on the AIB's website.

In addition to numerous meetings, office hours, and technical assistance sessions convened by the AIB to support Blueprint implementation in specific areas, including pre-kindergarten expansion, career counseling, and career ladder development, this year the AIB is providing technical assistance grants for strategic facilitators to the LEAs and the Career and Technical Education (CTE) Committee to support the development of strategic and innovative plans to overcome challenges to Blueprint implementation. Phase 2 of the technical assistance grants will also include targeted technical assistance, with the first priority to support LEAs in the strategic allocation of new resources and the reallocation of existing resources to support Blueprint implementation and meeting the minimum school funding requirements over the next several years. The AIB will encourage LEAs to partner with their county governments in this critical work. The AIB is reserving funds in its budget to support this work next year.

DLS Requested Comments and Agency Responses: FY2025 Operating Budget

**DLS Comment 1 (Page 2):** AIB should provide additional detail on proposed expenditures for contractual services and MOUs with other agencies.

**AIB Response:** The AIB has worked to help Blueprint implementers and stakeholders understand the Blueprint's purpose, theory of action, and requirements, and to support implementation. In order to provide support, the AIB has relied on several consultants who worked with the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, *i.e.*, Kirwan Commission, and collectively share unparalleled knowledge of the Blueprint's history and rationale and individual policy areas affected by the Blueprint, as well as expertise related to system change and educational equity. Their contributions have been critical to the AIB and State and local partners in providing support to implement the Blueprint effectively and with fidelity. In fiscal 2025, the proposed expenditures for these consulting services are \$200,000.

By utilizing MOUs, the AIB is leveraging the State of Maryland's internal strengths and assets by collaborating with existing State agencies to provide mission-critical assistance. The AIB has partnered with the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center to gain access to data sources and support related to data analysis and monitoring necessary to effectively track the Blueprint's implementation progress and overall impact. The Interagency Commission on School Construction (IAC) provides the AIB with necessary and essential legal function through time sharing of the Assistant Attorney General position. This provides cost-savings to both AIB's and IAC's operating budget while offering a unique and innovative approach to collaborative partnerships with new start-up agencies, effectively sharing resources. In fiscal 2025, the proposed expenditures for both MOUs are \$115,000.

**DLS Comment 2 (Page 5):** AIB should comment on the reasons for the high vacancy rate of 40% as of December 31, 2023, and provide a timetable to fill vacant positions in calendar 2024.

**AIB Response:** At the time of the AIB's start up in 2022, it was unclear what unique knowledge, experience and expertise would be needed for each job classification for the AIB to successfully carry out its mission. The positions were initially created and budgeted by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) using existing administrative classifications. Working with DBM, the AIB was able to establish unique job classifications aligned with the AIB's staffing needs. As a result, many originally budgeted positions were reclassified to higher grades by DBM in the spring of 2023 to reflect the AIB's specific needs; however, this required additional time for recruitment. Additionally, the budgeted amounts for the positions were unchanged in fiscal 2024, which presented a challenge for recruiting highly qualified and experienced staff with diverse backgrounds who often required higher compensation than what was budgeted.

The AIB hired 2 Education Policy Analysts in January, bringing the full-time staff total to 9. The AIB is currently recruiting for an Outreach and Communications Director and plans to

advertise for the remaining vacant positions in calendar 2024 as follows:

- Research and Accountability Director (Spring/Summer 2024)
- Data and Fiscal Analyst (Spring 2024)
- Education Policy Analyst (2) (Spring/Summer 2024)
- Administrator (Fall 2024)

The final position is an Administrator position to support the required segregation of fiscal/operational duties and provide administrative support. The AIB anticipates having all positions filled and being fully staffed early in fiscal 2025.

**DLS Comment 3 (Page 10):** AIB should comment on the reasons for the delays for State agency implementation plan review; teacher preparation program requirements; Blueprint training; submission of AIB's annual report; fiscal 2023 MFR data; and the independent evaluation. Additionally, AIB should comment on the status of distributing technical assistance grants awarded in fiscal 2023 and the agency's plans to increase technical assistance to State agencies in fiscal 2024. Due to these delays, the Department of Legislative Services (DLS) recommends adding budget bill language restricting funds until AIB submits a report to the budget committees on efforts that it is taking to complete its responsibilities by the statutory deadlines.

**AIB Response:**

**State Agency Plan Reviews:** The AIB set an ambitious turnaround time for reviewing and approving all State and LEA implementation plans by July 2023. This self-imposed deadline assumed that LEA plan reviews would be completed earlier than occurred following MSDE's decision to provide separate feedback to the LEAs, which added additional review and time to the process. The AIB did not have capacity to concurrently review and provide feedback on LEA plans, career counseling agreements, and State agency plans all while the Updated Blueprint Comprehensive Plan (BCP) was required to be adopted by August 1, 2023. To partially mitigate this situation, the AIB has adjusted the submission deadline for State agency plans beginning in 2024 to June 15 rather than the same deadline as the LEA plans. An additional factor was the leadership at three of the five agencies changed from when the plans were submitted (MSDE, CTE Committee, and the Maryland Higher Education Commission). This affected the review process as additional time was needed for the new leadership to become familiar with the Blueprint and the agency's implementation plan. AIB staff met with agency staff in fall 2023 to review their submissions, provide feedback, and receive updates on implementation progress before requesting any revisions to their initial plans. In addition to the CTE Committee's plan approval in October 2023, the AIB approved MHEC and the Consortium for Coordinated Community Supports plans in December 2023, and MSDE's plan in January 2024. The AIB is in the process of finalizing its review of the remaining State plan from the Juvenile Services Education Program, which was submitted in June 2023.

**Teacher Preparation Program Revisions:** The AIB reviewed draft regulations to implement the teacher preparation program requirements in the Blueprint (Section 6-120 and 6-121 of the Education Article) in Spring 2022 and provided feedback to MSBE and PSTEB. The Initial Blueprint Comprehensive Plan (BCP) set a deadline of fiscal 2023 for the regulations to be finalized. This date was revised to fiscal 2024 in the Updated BCP. The revised draft regulations were provided to the AIB for additional review in Summer 2023, at which time the AIB provided more limited feedback to MSBE and PSTEB. Code of Maryland Regulations 13A.07.06 Programs for Professionally Licensed Personnel was adopted by PSTEB in November 2023 and MSBE in December 2023. The regulations take effect in April 2024.

**Blueprint Training:** The Blueprint law specifically provides for a leadership training program to support Blueprint implementation to be developed by MSDE in collaboration with AIB for State and local board of education members, superintendents, senior staff, and administrators. The law did not set a deadline for implementation of the training, but the BCP set a fiscal 2023 deadline for the training to begin. The AIB has been collaborating with the Interim Superintendent and MSDE staff to develop and implement the training program. The program is budgeted in MSDE.

**Submission of AIB's annual report:** The AIB recognizes that timely submission of the annual report is important for the Governor, General Assembly, and the public to monitor the AIB's activities and accomplishments. The timing of the annual report due November 1 and the required inclusion of legislative recommendations presents a challenge. The AIB adopted its legislative recommendations at its December 2023 Board meeting. Moving forward, the AIB will submit the annual report by November 1, but it may need to submit - or revise - its legislative recommendations later.

**Fiscal 2023 MFR data:** The 2025 MFR included new fiscal 2024 measures related to Goal 1; therefore, there were no fiscal 2023 metrics to report at the time of the MFR submission. Although not required, the AIB will work with MSDE to provide the fiscal 2023 metrics with the 2026 MFR.

**Independent evaluation:** AIB is developing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the interim independent evaluation. To initiate this procurement, however, AIB must complete a fund certification for the entire contract; therefore, AIB requested a deficiency to be able to move ahead with the RFP. The FY 2025 Allowance includes \$1.0 million for the interim evaluation; once the budget is approved that includes the deficiency, the AIB will be able to release the RFP. The timeline to complete the procurement process and the interim evaluation by the current statutory date of October 1, 2024, is incredibly tight. The AIB has proposed adjusting the date to December 1, 2026, to recognize the delay in Blueprint implementation and provide a more meaningful evaluation of Blueprint implementation and progress (SB 1102/HB 1426). If this change is enacted, the AIB will continue the same timeline to procure an independent evaluator to begin working on the interim evaluation as soon as possible.

**Status of distributing technical assistance grants awarded in fiscal 2023:** All grants awarded in fiscal 2023 (Phase I) have been encumbered and are currently being drawn down as the grant program

continues and the status reports and invoices are due. The AIB will evaluate the effectiveness of the initiative to determine if it should be continued beyond the initial period. In addition to extending some of the partnerships initiated in Phase I, the AIB is currently surveying LEAs and strategic facilitators to identify other areas for targeted assistance; that information, coupled with the results of the 2024 Blueprint Implementation Plan review, will be used to identify additional topics for targeted support. The first topic for targeted assistance is the strategic allocation and reallocation of resources. The AIB is reserving most of the FY 2024 technical assistance appropriation to continue or modify the grant program in FY 2025 given the end of mandated funding.

**Agency's plans to increase technical assistance to State agencies in fiscal 2024:** The AIB is providing targeted technical assistance to State agencies related to their roles in Blueprint implementation in fiscal 2024. The AIB will provide each agency with comprehensive guides to inform their 2024 implementation plans, including descriptions of their overall expected roles in Blueprint implementation, the specific activities for which they are directly responsible, and questions they should answer in their plan submission. The AIB staff will meet with each agency's staff at least twice before their plans are due in June 2024 to discuss their submissions and provide feedback. Following each agency's implementation plan submission, AIB staff will meet at least quarterly with State agency staff to discuss implementation progress related to specific activities and tasks throughout the year. In addition, a strategic facilitator will continue to provide technical assistance to the CTE Committee through the Strategic Facilitator grant program overseen by the AIB.

**DLS Recommendation:** Report on delayed activities supporting Blueprint implementation.

**AIB Response:** The AIB concurs with the recommendation made by the analyst.