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BILL: House Bill 626
TITLE: Education – Public School Holidays – Veterans’ Day
DATE: February 25, 2016
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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House Bill 626 requires Veterans' Day to be a public school holiday.

PSSAM appreciates the intent of House Bill 626 to honor veterans who have given so much so that Americans can live and thrive in our great nation. However, PSSAM must respectfully oppose this bill.

PSSAM strongly advocates that school-related calendar decisions should be determined locally and based on meeting the academic needs of our students, providing professional development for our faculties, and honoring the wishes of our communities. Meeting the 180-day school calendar regulation is complex for Maryland’s twenty-four school systems. Adding another mandated school holiday, although well intended, further complicates the issue of teaching and learning during November. Many school systems are required to close in November for state and national elections and the Thanksgiving holiday is yet another loss of vital instructional time during this month. Major snowstorms like we just experienced add additional school calendar problems that need to be resolved.

Further complicating the issue of the school calendar is the increase of diversity among Maryland’s students and families. In fact, the Howard County Board of Education recently asked school system staff to identify one additional day to recognize each of the following cultural observances for the 2016-17 school year: Lunar New Year Eve, the Muslim holiday of Eid Al-Adha, and the Hindu holiday of Diwali. The Board asked the school system to propose options for including three new days when schools will be closed next school year.

It is critical that local school systems maintain local control of school calendars. PSSAM believes that this provides the greatest degree of latitude for local boards of education to manage the unique desires of communities as demonstrated in the Howard County example provided above. It also permits local communities the decision making authority to respond to parent needs.

PSSAM believes that honoring veterans can be better accomplished if students are attending school. There are numerous school activities that are held across the State that honor veterans and instruct students about the sacrifices made by so many. As an example, Middlesex Elementary School in Baltimore County presented a Veterans’ Day concert. Comprised of 68 student performers, the chorus performed patriotic songs that honored soldiers and promoted civic pride within the school community. The students accompanied the songs and poems with rhythm sticks, tennis balls, scarves, and recorders, providing a truly exceptional display of patriotism. Another example is Montgomery County Public Schools, which promotes Take a Veteran to School Day as a great way to bring history to life in the classroom and help students learn more about Veterans’ Day. Take a Veteran to School Day is a national program developed by The History Channel to link veterans with students nationwide. On Veterans’ Day, schools and communities invite veterans of all backgrounds to share their stories and receive thanks for their service. Events range from class visits to an all-school assembly.

For the reasons stated above, PSSAM respectfully **OPPOSES** House Bill 626 and urges an unfavorable committee report.