

# Safe, Modern School Buildings Are Essential for a World-Class Education

## Position Statement in Support of House Bill 1

*Given before the House Appropriations Committee*

Great public schools are part of the foundation of a thriving community. They make Maryland an attractive place for families and businesses today and train the workforce that will power our economy tomorrow. Many ingredients go into a world-class education system, from well-designed curricula to talented teachers. Equally important is the physical setting in which children learn. A safe, modern school building allows students and teachers to focus on what matters. Today, too many of Maryland's schools are near the end of their useful lives or fail to meet basic standards such as maintaining safe temperatures. A major investment in up-to-date school buildings is an essential step in creating the world-class school system Maryland children deserve. For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 1.

School buildings in Maryland are aging faster than we are replacing them. During the 2018–2019 school year:<sup>i</sup>

- **15** of Maryland's 24 local school districts saw the average age of their school buildings increase from the previous year
- **19** districts had school buildings that had an older average age than five years earlier
- **21** districts had school buildings that were older, on average, than they were in 2005
- School buildings statewide were **30** years old, on average—six years older than they were in 2005

This state of affairs is the culmination of decades of underinvestment. Altogether, Maryland's investments in school construction fell \$6 billion short of industry standards during the last 20 years.<sup>ii</sup> The consequences are starkest on the coldest days of the school year—when subpar heating systems forced children to wear hats and gloves in the classroom and ultimately closed dozens of schools in early 2018<sup>iii</sup>—and on the hottest—when the lack of air conditioning closed some schools in September and again in October 2019.<sup>iv</sup> In more temperate months, students and teachers deal with issues like leaking ceilings and signs warning of unsafe water.

Our inadequate investments in school facilities harm students in every part of our state—but those harms are not spread equally. Subpar school buildings add onto the barriers that hold back many Marylanders of color and families who struggle to make ends meet:<sup>v</sup>

- In the three counties with the oldest school buildings, 14 percent of residents have family income below the federal poverty line (about \$26,000 for a family of four). One in five residents are white, and three out of five residents are Black.
- In the three counties with the newest school buildings, only 6 percent of residents have income below the poverty line. Three out of five residents are white, and one in six are Black.

As policymakers contemplate bold, overdue investments in the day-to-day ingredients of a great education, such as expanding pre-kindergarten and reimagining the teaching profession, they should also ensure that these reforms

are implemented in an environment conducive to learning. As a Baltimore City teacher put it in August of last year, basics like comfortable temperatures “help students stay engaged. They are not focused so much on what the room feels like, but on the content, on what they’re trying to learn.”<sup>vi</sup>

The \$2 billion investment in updated school facilities called for in House Bill 1 would bring Maryland closer to guaranteeing every child a world-class education in a safe, modern school building. The bill's provisions to target investments to aging schools and schools that serve large numbers of children in low-income families would lessen the barriers that stand between too many children and the education they deserve. Ultimately, the physical improvements made possible by House Bill 1 will lay the groundwork for the kinds of fundamental reforms needed to make Maryland's public schools among the best in the world.

**For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the House Appropriations Committee make a favorable report on House Bill 1.**

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## Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 1

### *Bill summary*

House Bill 1 authorizes \$2 billion in revenue bonds to finance major investments in public school facilities. The bonds would be backed by gaming revenue required to supplement existing education funding under the "lockbox" constitutional amendment Maryland voters approved in 2018. The bill also mandates general fund capital appropriations for existing school construction programs and requires certain projects to prioritize aging schools, schools serving large shares of students in low-income families, and overcrowded schools.

### *Background*

There is significant need for investment in Maryland school facilities following more than a decade in which the condition of these facilities generally deteriorated:

- The average age of Maryland school buildings increased from 24 years in fiscal year 2005 to 30 years in fiscal year 2019. All but three of the state's 24 school districts saw the average age of their school buildings increase during this period.
- Inadequate infrastructure and extreme weather caused temporary school closures in 2018 and 2019 when schools were unable to maintain safe temperatures during hot or cold weather. The closures prevented students from receiving instruction on the affected days and limited schools' ability to provide adequate learning time during the school year.

### *Equity Implications*

The current state of Maryland public school facilities raises significant equity concerns:

- Aging school buildings are concentrated in counties that are home to more Marylanders of color and more families facing economic hardship than elsewhere in the state. In the three counties with the oldest school buildings, 14 percent of residents have family income below the federal poverty line (about \$26,000 for a family of four). One in five residents are white, and three out of five residents are Black.
- The most up-to-date school buildings are disproportionately located in counties with larger white populations and fewer families experiencing economic hardship than elsewhere in the state. In the three counties with the newest school buildings, only 6 percent of residents have income below the poverty line. Three out of five residents are white, and one in six are Black.

House Bill 1 has potential to mitigate these concerns for three reasons:

- Increasing the total resources available for school construction is likely to improve the general condition of school facilities. Because children who face other barriers due to economic hardship or the legacy of racist policies are more likely to attend schools with substandard facilities, a general improvement in school facilities is likely to bring especially large benefits to these students.
- Increasing state investments in school construction will make possible improvements to school facilities in counties that have limited ability to invest local resources.
- Provisions in the bill to prioritize projects in aging schools and schools that serve large shares of students in low-income families will increase access to high-quality school facilities in communities that are most likely to lack that access today.

### *Impact*

House Bill 1 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

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<sup>i</sup> MDCEP analysis of Managing for Results data published in the Maryland FY 2021 proposed budget.

<sup>ii</sup> MDCEP calculation based on materials from the August 28, 2019, meeting of the Maryland Workgroup on the Assessment and Funding of School Facilities, <http://iac.maryland.gov/Workgroups/FundingWG/2019%2008%2028%20AFWG%20Meeting%20Material.pdf>. Maryland's 20-year average annual state and local investment of \$1.9 billion in school facilities falls \$300 million short of the \$2.2 billion industry standard cited by experts. This shortfall totals about \$6 billion over 20 years.

<sup>iii</sup> Madison Park, Jason Hanna, Paul Murphy, and Sheena Jones, "Baltimore Closes Public Schools after Students Sat in Cold Classrooms," *CNN*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/04/us/baltimore-schools-cold/index.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Danielle Gaines, "On a Day of Record Heat, Agency Advances AC Projects—With a Notable Exception," *Maryland Matters*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.marylandmatters.org/2019/09/13/on-a-day-of-record-heat-agency-advances-ac-projects-with-a-notable-exception/>  
Cody Boteler, "Baltimore County Announces \$16 Million in Matching Funds for School Air Conditioning," *Baltimore Sun*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-county/cng-co-schools-air-20191002-dkyxi3avw5fgtg56u5yqcfkwu-story.html>

<sup>v</sup> MDCEP analysis of Managing for Results data published in the Maryland FY 2021 proposed budget, U.S. Census Bureau Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, and U.S. Census Population Estimates.

<sup>vi</sup> Tim Tooten, "Some Baltimore School Teachers Receive Portable Fans for Classrooms," *WBALTV11*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.wbaltv.com/article/baltimore-school-teachers-receive-portable-fans-for-classrooms/28861193>

