

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2006 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 1733
Ways and Means

(Delegate Cryor, *et al.*)

**Task Force on Environmental Health Conditions in Maryland's Portable
Classrooms**

This bill establishes a task force to conduct a study of environmental health conditions in portable classrooms throughout the State. The task force must submit a report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly by December 1, 2006. The Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) must provide staff for the task force.

The bill takes effect June 1, 2006 and terminates December 31, 2006.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Any expense reimbursements for task force members and staffing costs for MDE and DHMH are assumed to be minimal and absorbable within existing budgeted resources.

Local Effect: The bill would not materially affect local operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: The study must identify potentially unhealthy environmental conditions in portable classrooms in the State; evaluate portable classroom design and construction specifications, ventilation systems, school maintenance practices, indoor air quality, and potentially toxic contamination including mold and other biological contaminants; and

identify and recommend best practices to prevent harmful environmental health conditions in portable classrooms.

Background: According to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), as of November 2005 there were 2,986 portable classrooms in use in the State. Of those, 202 are State-owned, 2,056 are locally-owned, and 728 are locally-leased. The number of portable classrooms is expected to increase in the next few years.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), portable classrooms have been a feature of many school districts for years. From a district's perspective, the two advantages of portable classrooms are low initial cost and short time between specification and occupancy. They are intended to provide flexibility to school districts, enabling quick response to demographic changes and providing the ability to be moved from one school to another as demographics change. In reality, portable classrooms are seldom moved and become permanent fixtures of the school.

Recent surges in student population fueled an explosion in the use of portable classrooms in many parts of the country, raising concerns about the healthfulness of portable classrooms. EPA advises that the most common problems with portable classrooms include:

- poorly functioning HVAC systems that provide minimal ventilation with outside air;
- poor acoustics from loud ventilation systems;
- chemical off-gassing from pressed wood and other high-emission materials, which may be of greater concern because of rapid occupancy after construction;
- water entry and mold growth; and
- site pollution from nearby parking lots or loading areas.

According to EPA, the effects of poor indoor air quality in portable classrooms are no different than those in permanent classrooms. All school buildings use similar construction and furnishing materials, so the types of chemicals present in indoor air are not likely to be different for portable versus permanent classrooms. However, pressed-wood products, which may contain higher concentrations of formaldehyde, are used more in the factory-built portable units than in buildings constructed on-site. As a result, levels of airborne chemicals may be higher in new portable classrooms, especially if ventilation is reduced.

State Expenditures: DHMH advises that costs would increase by an estimated \$60,507 in fiscal 2007 to reimburse members for mileage and to purchase refreshments for meetings. The estimate is based on the following assumptions:

- six meetings, with the average task force member traveling 100 miles per meeting;
- 48 site visits to examine portable classrooms in each county, with the average task force member traveling 200 miles per site visit;
- all task force members attending every meeting and every site visit; and
- refreshments for each meeting.

The majority of DHMH's estimate relates to reimbursing members for mileage incurred to attend 48 site visits. Legislative Services advises, however, that such costs are likely overstated. First, the estimate assumes that each member would attend every site visit, which is unlikely. Second, it assumes that each member would drive a personal vehicle to each site visit; presumably staff could arrange for group transportation that would be less costly. Third, the estimate assumes two site visits in each county; however, Legislative Services advises that it is unclear how many site visits would be needed and, further, how many site visits could even be undertaken within a seven-month period. In addition, based on data provided by MSDE, not every county in the State has portable classrooms in use. Accordingly, it is assumed that any costs incurred for reimbursements would not be significant and could likely be absorbed within existing budgeted resources.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Maryland Department of the Environment, Maryland State Department of Education, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Legislative Services

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