

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2019 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
Enrolled - Revised

Senate Bill 879

(Senator Griffith, *et al.*)

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Ways and Means

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Primary and Secondary Education - Black History Month - Harriet Tubman and  
Frederick Douglass

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This bill requires public schools to devote a part of at least one school day to appropriate exercises that relate to Black History Month, with an emphasis on Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and the contributions they made in the fight against slavery.

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**Fiscal Summary**

**State Effect:** None. The bill is directed at local school systems.

**Local Effect:** Local school systems can devote a part of the school day to appropriate exercises that relate to Black History Month using existing resources. Revenues are not affected.

**Small Business Effect:** None.

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**Analysis**

**Current Law:** The public schools must devote a part of the day to appropriate exercises for the following days: Washington's Birthday; Lincoln's Birthday; Veterans' Day; Columbus Day; Arbor Day; and any other day of national significance.

**Background:**

*Black History Month*

Black History Month is celebrated nationwide during the month of February and became an official national observance in 1976. The idea of commemorating the achievements and

contributions made by African Americans to the nation developed in 1915 when Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH). Through the association, Dr. Woodson began pressing for the establishment of a Black History Week as a way to bring national attention to the many accomplishments of African Americans and to neutralize the negative distortions that were promoted by many people in society at that time.

In 1926, the association established the first Black History Week, which was observed during the second week of February to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. The response to this observance was overwhelming, with Black History clubs being established and school teachers requesting materials to instruct their students. To serve the needs of school teachers, ASALH began publishing photographs and portraits of important African Americans. In 1976, this observance officially became Black History Month.

Chapter 301 of 2007 required the Governor, in recognition of the historical contributions that Black Americans have made to the State, to annually proclaim the month of February as Black History Month. The proclamation must urge educational and cultural organizations to observe Black History Month properly with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

### *Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass*

Harriet Tubman was born a slave in Dorchester County, Maryland. She later became a Union spy and, as one of the most well-known conductors on the Underground Railroad, helped lead many slaves to freedom. In her later years, Tubman became active in the women's suffrage movement.

Frederick Douglass was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He escaped from slavery and became a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He published *The North Star* weekly, wrote three autobiographies, and participated in the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York. Douglass was a leading opponent of the fugitive slave law. He was an advisor to President Abraham Lincoln, a U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia, and Minister-General to the Republic of Haiti.

**Local Expenditures:** Local school systems can devote a part of at least one school day to appropriate exercises that relate to Black History Month, with an emphasis on Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and the contributions they made in the fight against slavery using existing resources, including any necessary staff training.

Baltimore City Public Schools advises that many schools already have school-based or classroom-based lessons or celebrations during Black History Month, and that

Harriet Tubman's and Frederick Douglass's historical achievements are already included in the district curriculum in various places (though this may not take place during February).

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### **Additional Information**

**Prior Introductions:** None.

**Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Maryland State Department of Education; Baltimore City Public Schools; Department of Legislative Services

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