

# ADVOCATES

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

To: Chair Pinsky and members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
From: Shamoyia Gardiner, Education Policy Director  
Re: Senate Bill 275: Education - Community and Local Accountability for Struggling Schools (CLASS) Act of 2020 - Innovation Schools  
Date: February 4, 2020  
Position: Oppose

Maryland's public schools have been persistently underfunded since 2008, to the tune of about \$2 million per school, per year. This underfunding has had particularly disastrous consequences for students of color. As of 2017, nearly half of all students of color in the state attended school in one of three consistently underfunded jurisdictions: Baltimore City, Prince George's county, and Caroline county.<sup>1</sup> The legislature and Governor established a Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education to, in addition to making specific policy recommendations, update the state's public education funding formula to address the gap between student needs and school offerings.

Senate Bill 275 flies in the face of the three years' worth of work invested by that Commission, under the guise of accountability in public education. Under its facade, **SB 275 is primed to achieve only three aims: assign busy work to underperforming schools, impose unfunded mandates on local boards of education, and further entrench disparities across the state.**

*SB 275 assigns busy work to underperforming schools.*

The bill seeks to create "Innovation Schools" in name only, assigning a litany of bureaucratic requirements to small planning groups which are assigned to each school identified under the bill. Intensive checklists and stringent reporting requirements don't actually yield better academic outcomes for students—only the implementation of evidence-based, data driven, thoughtful collaborative plans could do that. **SB 275 doesn't guarantee planning or implementation grants, technical assistance, data collection, or dissemination support to impacted schools.** In fact, it makes clear that the State Board of Education will only provide those supports as practicable and provided for in the State budget—which the Governor has set without necessary funding.

Further, the planning mandated by SB 275 is duplicative of ongoing efforts required under the reauthorization of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. In April of 2019, the state identified 42 schools qualifying for comprehensive support and improvement—37 in Baltimore City and three in Prince George's county. ESSA already requires the state to identify Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools, which create plans and are held accountable at the school, school system, and state

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<sup>1</sup> The Education Trust, 2018

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level. Similarly, the state also currently identifies schools for Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), which includes 376 schools as of the 2018-2019 school year. The proposed planning for underperforming schools is already underway. SB 275, at best, duplicates federal mandates and attempts to take credit for making underperforming schools repeat their work.

*SB 275 imposes unfunded mandates on local boards of education.*

The fiscal and policy note for the bill denotes a burden on local school systems—particularly those with multiple qualifying schools. Of the 14 school qualifying schools identified, more than half are located in persistently underfunded districts which also serve large concentrations of students of color; six in Baltimore City and three in Prince George's county. To meet the mandates laid out in the bill, it is expected that these two jurisdictions will “need to redirect limited staff resource from other projects”. Given that the bill is primarily focused on planning and does not detail any rationale for how that unfunded planning will yield better academic outcomes for students, **SB 275 offers nothing more than wasted time for jurisdictions with critical needs.**

The state department of education has also illustrated a clear need for additional funding and staffing capacity to fulfil the mandates of this bill, though the agency's concerns were overridden in the summary of the fiscal note on the bill.

*SB 275 further entrenches disparities across the state.*

The hypervigilant focus on mandating certain actions of underperforming schools without coupling such mandates with financial resources, additional staffing, and technical support is a tried-and-true method of dismantling public education while appearing to be “tough” and value accountability. No amount of rhetoric can change what data bears out: income inequality is on the rise in Maryland. Economic status is correlated with race in Maryland, just as it is elsewhere in the United States. Poverty is correlated with adverse childhood experiences, which impact childhood development and impact students' ability to behave in alignment with codes of conduct as well as their cognitive development. The issue of underperforming schools, especially those located in underfunded school districts serving large concentrations of students of color, is not happenstance. **The first step to addressing these disparities and poor academic outcomes is to resource schools according to the demonstrated student need. SB 275 does not do that.**

SB 275 does not accurately assess the needs of students in Maryland's underperforming schools, does little to mitigate the impact of those needs, and if passed, would only: assign busy work to underperforming schools, impose unfunded mandates on local boards of education, and further entrench disparities across the state. For these reasons, **ACY strongly urges an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 275.**