

**Testimony in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 546
School Buildings – Drinking Water Outlets - Elevated Level of Lead
(Safe School Drinking Water Act)**

**Senate Education Health & Environmental Affairs Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 546, which alters the definition of “elevated level of lead” to mean anything over five parts per billion in drinking water outlets in public and nonpublic school buildings. The bill also requires remedial actions by a school by August 1, 2022 for any water test with an “elevated lead level” that was tested on or before June 1, 2021.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland’s public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

We have all seen the reports from across the country of cities and school districts dealing with the horrors of lead contaminated drinking water in their schools. Here in Maryland, schools in Baltimore City, Montgomery County and Harford County have all had recent experiences with this problem.^{1 2} Unsurprisingly, many times lead is detected in older school building with older plumbing systems. In these instances, when lead is detected, water delivery systems are shut down and parents and guardians are informed. But the irreparable damage to the children is already done. According to a 2016 policy statement titled “Prevention of Childhood Lead Toxicity” issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), blood lead levels as low as 50 part per billion can impair a child’s cognition.³ According to the report, this low level of exposure can cause “...diminished intellectual and academic abilities, higher rates of neurobehavioral disorders such as hyperactivity and attention deficits, and lower birth weight in children.” In discussing the report’s findings, Dr. Jennifer Lowry, chair of the AAP Council on Environmental Health said, “We now know that there is no safe level of blood lead concentration for children, and the best ‘treatment’ for lead poisoning is to prevent any exposure before it happens.”

¹ <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/high-lead-levels-costly-for-maryland-schools/63635/> (Accessed February 8, 2021)

² <https://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-md-lead-report-card-20190321-story.html> (Accessed February 8, 2021)

³ <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/1/e20161493> (Accessed February 8, 2021)



MSEA agrees wholeheartedly with Secretary Ben Grumbles when he was quoted⁴ in 2020 saying “Lead poisoning is a preventable environmental injustice and we are making real progress in eradicating it. Through universal testing, strong enforcement, and a new emphasis on responding to lower levels of lead poisoning, we can continue to reduce childhood lead poisoning in Maryland.” We believe Senate Bill 546 will get us close to that goal.

Lead in the drinking water is not only dangerous to our children, but it can have adverse health impacts on the adults in school buildings as well. Adults who have been exposed to lead can experience symptoms such as high blood pressure; joint and muscle pain; difficulties with memory and concentration; mood disorders, abdominal pain; headaches; and damage to reproductive systems.⁵

Six years after the Flint water crisis began, we are only beginning to comprehend the long-term consequences to the children. The costs to school systems who will be required to provide remediation and support services to these children could be astronomical well into the future. While we cannot prevent the exposure children around our state have already experienced, we can take proactive steps to ensure that this does not happen in the future. This bill stands as a powerful preventative measure that will benefit every student and every educator and school staff member in our state. We cannot teach our children if they are home sick or if we are ill.

Remediating lead contamination in our schools is a critical public health need. By revising the current definition of “elevated level of lead” to 5 parts per billion, we can better ensure the safety and health for all of Maryland’s children and educators.

MSEA urges a Favorable Report on Senate Bill 546.

⁴ <https://southernmarylandchronicle.com/2020/10/27/childhood-lead-poisoning-in-maryland-drops-as-state-moves-to-respond-to-greater-range-of-cases-under-more-protective-standard/> (Accessed February 8, 2021)

⁵ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/lead-poisoning/symptoms-causes/syc-20354717> (Accessed February 8, 2021)