

March 6, 2023

Dear Legislators,

I am the mother of five children who have all attended a public charter school in Frederick County, with my youngest three still currently in attendance. I am writing to you today to ask you for your support of SB0646 [School Construction - Public Charter School Facility Fund - Establishment](#) sponsored by Senator McCray.

As a member of the Senate Budget and Tax Committee, this bill will be before you on March 7th. I am writing to share why I feel this bill is so important to pass. Although Maryland laws allow for the existence of charter schools, the laws do not give charter schools equitable support or funding. SB0646 would supply much needed funding which would specifically help to alleviate the unfair rent burden that our charter school carries.

LEAs are able to utilize capital funding and general funds from other sources, not available to public charter schools, to support their facilities, operations, & maintenance. SB0646 seeks to establish a fund managed by the IAC that allows public charter schools to apply for up to \$2000 per pupil annually for eligible facilities-related expenses. This funding does not impact the Blueprint formula or take funding away from any other public school students, as the funding would come from the State's General Fund. Instead, SB0646 will allow more Blueprint dollars to be spent IN the classroom on learning instead of ON the school's facility. It also sets strong parameters around spending accountability and transparency while ensuring there is standard bond bill language on repayment if a school should close or sell a privately-owned building.

Charter school students are public school students and they deserve to be educated in safe, welcoming, adequate school buildings just like their traditional public school peers. Every decision at our charter school is made with cost in mind and we get by with the bare bones options. We have small groups of students that need to be pulled out by a specialist to meet their advanced academic needs and no extra space in our school for them to go to meet. Our classrooms are small and measured precisely to meet the minimum required standards with no extra wiggle room because we needed to fit as many rooms as possible into as small of a space as possible. We do not have a space in the building where a band can meet and practice music without disturbing the surrounding classrooms, so we therefore do not offer band like every other traditional elementary school in our county. Our gym has support pillars in the middle and lacks a standard wood floor or traditional mechanized basketball goals. When our school was built, we could not afford those upgrades without negatively impacting the funding for our teachers and students. Our library doubles as an art room and Spanish room at certain times of the day because we do not have enough money to further build out the school. The recess area at our charter school is a fenced off portion of a parking lot with very minimal equipment for which we had to fundraise. Our rent is paid with our per pupil allocated funds, as is our security system, and any maintenance repairs or school improvements or expansions. These are huge expenses every year that other public schools do not incur. Traditional public schools are able to give a greater portion of their funds to classroom materials, teacher training, and programs that will improve the educational experience of their students. Our scholars deserve the same access to those allocated dollars.

Why does the choice to attend a public charter school have to come with these costs and trade-offs. Just because a family decides to send their children to a public charter school, which is 100% staying in the public school system, why do they have to attend, on average, an older, more in need of repair, discarded building? Why do charter school teachers have to teach in buildings that do not have adequate space, amenities, or supports? Why do charter school operators have to pull funding out of their Blueprint dollars to pay for their buildings, while traditional schools & LEAs pull from capital funding and general funds? Bottom line, it isn't equitable. Through your support, we can work to close inequities public charter school students, families, and teachers experience in their school buildings every day.

This year we celebrate 20 years of the charter school law in Maryland. It is about time we get to work funding public charter school facilities. We look forward to the hearing on March 7th and your support of SB0646, School Construction - Public Charter School Facility Fund - Establishment. Please know that it is not only myself, but the larger charter school community across the state of more than 24,000 families, 50 schools in seven districts standing behind you.

Thank you,
Tammy Van Orden