

BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Brandon M. Scott
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Johnette A. Richardson
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of School Commissioners

Dr. Sonja Brookins Santelises
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**Testimony of the
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners
In Opposition of
Senate Bill 849
Baltimore City – Modifying or Closing Public School Facility –
Review by Community Task Force**

March 1, 2023

As drafted, the proposed legislation requires that the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners may not take final action on the closing or modifying of a school building until the President of the local community association of the community where the school facility is located appoints a community task force to examine and make recommendations concerning any future use of the facility.

City Schools takes seriously the value and importance of community input when making portfolio decisions and include the community in decisions. Every year we undergo a process to make difficult decisions that, in the end, with the limited resources we have, will improve our ability to offer the rich and varied educational programming our students deserve. While this process, the Annual Review of Schools, can result in a variety of recommendations such as opening new traditional schools, reconfiguring grade spans in existing schools, merging school communities, relocating schools, we recognize the most challenging of these recommendations are those for school closure and/or facility surplus.

School programs and the facilities that house our schools are major institutions within our communities. The proposed closure of schools can feel like a major loss and many of the people who are served by and work at these schools experience a sense of grief. **This is why the process we use involves not just the quantitative and qualitative data that district staff analyze in this process, but also listening to and adjusting recommendations based on the impact, experiences, ideas and hopes expressed by our students and the communities we serve. Evidence of this can be found in the record that shows changes in recommendations based on community input.** Further, to ensure robust opportunities to provide input, the timeline by which **this process takes place has been expanded from a formal process that once occurred over several weeks to one that lasts months and includes working with communities for a few years to support and drive any major transitions.**

In addition to our own process, the City of Baltimore has an established School Surplus Taskforce, of which City Schools is an active participant. The existing process is extensive. Before site control of a school can be turned over to the City, the Board of Public Works, a State Agency, must approve the surplus of the site and that it will no longer be used as an educational facility. It is only after City Schools receives approval from the State that the district can officially declare the property surplus.

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Once a property is declared surplus, the City officially begins its process of identifying a responsible agency for the site. The property is assigned to an agency for use or disposition through the Space Utilization Committee. Per the City Charter, the Space Utilization Committee, chaired by the Comptroller's Real Estate Office, is responsible for assigning properties to the appropriate agencies.

Based on stakeholder engagement, market assessment, and expressions of interest in the property, the City determines the appropriate re-use path for each property. In many cases, the property will be offered for sale through an Expression of Interest or Request for Proposals by Baltimore Housing or Baltimore Development Corporation. Other properties may be re-used directly by City agencies, other government entities, or have other special re-use considerations. Properties in weaker markets may need a different approach. This approach might be offering the property with subsidy, demolishing the building and offering a cleared site, demolishing the building and creating open space, leasing the property, etc. If the initial re-use path identified for a property is not successful in identifying a long term viable re-use for the property, another re-use path will be identified.

The City is committed to conducting stakeholder engagement so that the City (and any potential future users of the facilities) can understand community desires and concerns. This might include desires and concerns about uses, the site, or access. Stakeholders may identify particular uses that they would like to see in their neighborhood that are not currently available elsewhere. The City will gather and document stakeholder desires and concerns and make them available to prospective developers to set the stage for redevelopment. Preference can be given to proposals that respond to community desires and concerns.

Given the thoroughness of the existing procedures, the proposed legislation is unnecessary and would inevitably lead to costly delays. The absence of timelines means the community organization could substantially delay the work of City Schools and the City of Baltimore. In addition, the notion of community task force members having authority to sign sale contracts is concerning and would likely be another mechanism of delay. Furthermore, some neighborhoods do not have community associations, whereas other areas may have more than one, and subsequently more than one association president.

For all of these reasons, City Schools respectfully urges an UNFAVORABLE report of Senate Bill 849.

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