

RE: Support for HB0736 School Construction – Local Cost-Share – Alterations

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair and Members of the House Appropriations Committee:

As president of the Kent County Board of Education, a lifelong Kent County resident and someone who attended local schools, I am writing to you today in support of House Bill 0736, School Construction - Local Cost-Share - Alterations.

Fingers crossed, you will receive numerous letters like mine. Most likely many of them will follow a script that outlines what I would describe as “unacceptable” conditions of an aging school building that is poorly laid out to deliver education in the 21st century.

Kent County is the smallest public school system in Maryland, in terms of number of schools — three elementary schools, one consolidated middle school and one consolidated high school that I attended in the early 1970s — and number of students.

Economically, there are two Kent Counties — very wealthy because of our waterfront property owners and well-heeled retirees, and very poor. It is the latter who attend our schools.

The state set the 50/50 split because a formula shows Kent County to be very wealthy, though every student in each of our schools gets free breakfast and lunch because of our poverty rates.

Without more state assistance, Kent County cannot afford to build a new middle school estimated to cost upward of \$70 million.

It is disheartening that despite our economic challenges, the state-county cost share for Kent County is the lowest among the 24 school systems. Other school systems on the Eastern Shore that have similar high rates of poverty have received significantly more state aid — including Somerset at 100% and Dorchester and Wicomico each at 98%.

Let me tell you about our Kent County Middle School building, which currently serves all sixth, seventh and eighth graders in the county. That means that every middle school student who attends Kent County Public Schools will be served by KCMS.

The building was constructed in 1950 as Chestertown High School, and was intended for 30 to 50 years of use.

My mother was a member of the graduating Class of 1955.

When the new consolidated Kent County High School was built 53 years ago, the CHS building became Chestertown Middle School. I was a member of the Class of 1972. The school was the “center of our universe” and a focal point for the Chestertown

community; during off-school hours the 15-acre campus accommodated several age-group baseball leagues as well as youth lacrosse and football programs.

In 2010, middle schools in Chestertown, Rock Hall and Galena consolidated into a single building, Kent County Middle School in Chestertown.

Over the years, despite the herculean efforts of our maintenance and custodial staffs, the school building looks its age — inside and out. Already in 2024-25, instruction has been disrupted on several occasions, and students have been sent home, because of failing infrastructure.

I would agree that what is happening inside the classroom is more important than busted pipes, poor ventilation, dented student lockers, leaking roofs, buckled flooring and stained ceilings, but all this contributes to school culture and the public's perception.

Research indicates there is a strong positive connection between student achievement and student pride. When students feel pride in their school, they are more likely to perform well academically.

And when students perform well academically, the community as a whole succeeds.

School systems are not tasked with being economic drivers for a community, but that is the ripple effect of strong, achieving schools; they serve as magnets to draw young families and industry. Also, it's easier to recruit highly qualified teachers.

As an aside, in the spring of 2022, then-Superintendent Karen Couch told the Board of Education that the Interagency Commission on School Construction was against renovation of KCMS due to the age and condition of the existing building. Renovation was estimated at the time to be upwards of \$100 million.

Thank you for considering this letter.

Respectfully,
Trish McGee
Kent County Board of Education president