

KENT COUNTY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Senate Bill 843 - School Construction – Local Cost–Share – Alterations House Appropriation Committee

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I wish to offer testimony in support of Senate Bill 843, School Construction – Local Cost-Share – Alterations. Since 2017, I have assisted the Board of Education of Kent County with a range of facility planning matters. Based on a Facilities Master Plan approved by the Board in early 2018, the school system has carried out much-needed facility improvements, including security vestibules at every school, roof and mechanical system replacements, and targeted renovations at two elementary schools. The Board and Superintendent have demonstrated that they are responsible stewards of State and local funds, accomplishing these projects within budget and at a high level of quality.

While four out of five of the instructional buildings in Kent County are now better positioned to support contemporary learning approaches, the Kent County Middle School facility remains virtually untouched. The original 1950 building was last renovated in 1976. In October 2023 the Board of Education approved replacement of this facility on the existing site in Chestertown. The Board of County Commissioners supports the project, and the Interagency Commission on School Construction has granted Planning Approval as well as design funds through the Built to Learn Act and the Capital Improvement Program. The school system has worked closely with the Maryland Stadium Authority on procurement of architectural/engineering services and construction management services. Design is now well underway, with an anticipated bid date at the end of this calendar year. Working closely with Superintendent McComas and her staff, the project design team has sought every possible means to reduce the size and cost of the facility. This research continues, and it may eventually require removing program elements that are important in a middle school instructional program.

This critical project concerns equity of access to education. Since Kent County Middle School is the only middle school in the county, the deficiencies of the building affect the education of every public school student during their formative early adolescent years, when their attachments to educational achievement and to their communities are being shaped. The current facility presents many barriers to effective education, including:

- **Deficiency of instructional and support spaces:** A complete absence of full, purpose-designed science laboratories, numerous classrooms without acoustic isolation, a lack of spaces for instruction for students with special needs, the absence of teacher planning spaces, and an art room without natural daylighting. At a time when emphasis is placed on STEM and STEAM instruction and on instruction for students with special needs, these deficiencies translate to significant impediments for the students of Kent County.
- **Accessibility:** The building does not meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. It has no accessible toilet for either students or staff, has no elevator to the second floor, and the front entrance is not ADA accessible. It has a single accessible route from parking to the ground floor. These deficiencies present serious barriers to students, staff members and visitors with disabilities.
- **Circulation:** During class changes students must pass through the Library Media Center, music students pass through the Gymnasium, and maintaining separation of the age groups during lunch periods requires a convoluted and time-consuming sequence of movements.
- **Building performance:** The building is not energy efficient and maintenance of the aged building systems is a drain on the school system budget, diverting much-needed funds from the classroom. School days have been lost due to failing building systems.

I served as the Executive Director of the Maryland Public School Construction Program from 2003 to 2016. As a lead author of the original regulations under which the State school construction program has operated since 2007, I understand how serious an issue is involved in any adjustment of long-standing

practices for allocating funds. However, the mission of the school construction program has always been to ensure that no school in Maryland is significantly deficient when compared to those in other jurisdictions. Kent County Public Schools is the only school system in the state that has not received a new school from the increase in funding that resulted from the Public School Facilities Act of 2004 and subsequent legislation. As a result, the school system has among the oldest average square footage of school space in the state, a situation that has a negative impact on students throughout the county.

To ensure that students in Kent County have the same educational opportunities as their peers in other Maryland school systems, Kent County Public Schools seeks an exception to the standard State construction funding percentage. The exception will allow the replacement of Kent County Middle School to proceed to construction. The bill acknowledges the high level of need among Kent students by using the USDA Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) as the basis for adjusting the State percentage. Senate Bill 843 - School Construction – Local Cost–Share – Alterations will address the needs of these students, and consequently I request the members of the House Appropriations Committee to give a favorable report on this legislation.