

HB0854
School Construction - Nonpublic Special Education School Renovation Program - Established
Appropriations Committee
February 17th 2026
Favorable

Catholic Charities supports HB854, which establishes the Nonpublic Special Education School Renovation Program in the Interagency Commission on School Construction to provide grant funding to certain nonpublic special education schools for certain renovations and improvements to classrooms, upgrades to residential cottages on school grounds, health, safety and accessibility upgrades, infrastructure modernization, and certain new construction.

For over a century, Catholic Charities has provided care and services to improve the lives of Marylanders in need. We accompany individuals and families as they age with dignity, pursue employment and career advancement, heal from trauma and addiction, achieve independence, prepare for educational success, and welcome immigrant neighbors into Maryland communities.

The Villa Maria School and the Villa Maria School Type III Diagnostic Program at St. Vincent's Villa, a short-term residential facility (both located in Timonium, MD), are programs of Catholic Charities that serve students in kindergarten through 8th grade who have experienced significant emotional, behavioral, and learning challenges.

This bill is critically important to our work for the following reasons:

1. Public School Referrals and High-Needs Student Population

100% of our students are referred by local school systems. We serve students whose needs cannot be met in traditional public-school settings.

Currently, we are serving students from 12 of the 23 local school systems in Maryland, and over the years have had students from every jurisdiction. The children are referred to our school through the IEP process and have been approved for a nonpublic special education setting due to the intensity of their social/emotional, and academic needs. Our students come to us after previous support and placements have failed. Their experiences in school have been negative, and they have low self-esteem and are not motivated to learn. Many of our children have experienced trauma and loss, especially those who are also residential and have been separated from their families and loved ones. They display a lot of pain-based behaviors including aggression, property destruction, and elopements. This results in a lot of wear and tear on our buildings. Safety is our number one priority, and we have a great deal of expense outside of a typical education setting to ensure the well-being of our students. Our interior and exterior doors must be able to withstand constant banging and kicking and are special ordered to meet our safety requirements. Fencing is another safety feature that is a must to keep our children safe while allowing them places to play outdoors and reduce the potential for elopement and being harmed in nearby busy traffic areas. Also, due to the increased safety risks of serving students with past trauma and a history of aggressive behaviors, we have the added expense of needing cameras installed throughout our program. These cameras protect children and the staff when incidents occur. They also help us to learn and make improvements to our practice to reduce risk of student and staff injuries through training and education.

2. Aging Infrastructure and Ongoing Capital Needs

Our buildings require ongoing structural, mechanical, and safety upgrades to continue meeting the needs of this high-acuity population.

As an agency we struggle to keep up with the constant need for repairs and replacement of these life-safety features that are essential to our work with some of Maryland's most challenging and highly acute children. ***The MSDE funding that we receive for our students does not include any funding for capital improvements.*** Each year we make tough decisions to make our agency's capital funds go towards the highest safety related priorities such as replacing heavy duty exterior doors with delayed egress and swipe card technology, updating our security camera hardware, and adding fencing to areas where there is an increased risk of elopement. It can take several years to get one project completed and this does not allow for repairs and updates of our facility such as heating/cooling systems, roof repair/replacement, and other building upgrades.

3. Therapeutic Environment and the Ecologically Oriented CARE Model

Since 2018, our residential and school program has been using an evidence-based trauma-informed care model that was developed at Cornell University. The CARE model (Children and Residential Experiences) provides a principle-based guide for improving relationships and creating a therapeutic environment that promotes healing, development, and learning. One of these principles, based on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, is the Ecologically Oriented principle. His work focused on how the ecology or environment impacts the development of a child. When adults create safe and nurturing environments, children can grow and flourish. A safe and secure environment allows children to heal and practice new skills. These kinds of environments offer comfort and security and enhance the adults' capacity to nurture. Of course, a big part of the ecology of a place is about the people that are in it.

Attracting, hiring, and retaining skilled and compassionate staff. The other part of the environment is the physical aspect. This is where the safety features come in but also, children with a history of trauma need opportunities in their environment to practice new skills. Our children need calming spaces away from the unit/classroom. They benefit greatly from activities like gardening and taking care of plants and animals. Building greenhouses, adding chill spaces and sensory rooms, are all things that these funds could be utilized for to enhance their development and healing. Since implementing the CARE model, we have seen our reliance on physical interventions like restraint decrease dramatically (by more than 75%). The environment has a great deal to do with this and our ability to support children in a safe a more therapeutic environment.

Establishing the Nonpublic Special Education School Renovation Program through HB854 would create grant funding opportunities to address the environmental and safety needs of our students.

For these reasons, Catholic Charities of Baltimore urges the committee to issue a favorable report for HB854.

Submitted By: Madelin Martinez on behalf of Agatha Callahan, Associate Administrator Villa Maria School