



Sheppard Pratt

Written Testimony

House Bill 854 – School Construction - Nonpublic Special Education School Renovation Program - Established

House Appropriations Committee

February 17, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 854, which establishes the Nonpublic Special Education School Renovation Program within the Interagency Commission on School Construction. This is an important step toward ensuring that Maryland's most vulnerable students, particularly those placed in Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs), learn and heal in safe, modern, therapeutic environments.

Sheppard Pratt is the nation's largest private, nonprofit behavioral health provider, serving more than 80,000 Marylanders annually across 163 programs in 16 counties. Our continuum includes inpatient hospitals, crisis services, outpatient mental health clinics, CCBHCs, special education schools, and two Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs).

Our Sheppard Pratt School & Residential Treatment Center serves adolescents ages 12–18 with significant emotional, behavioral, and trauma-related needs. These students require intensive therapeutic programming alongside specialized education that meets Maryland's curriculum standards.

Why HB854 Is Critical for RTC-Connected Schools

HB854 establishes a targeted capital program to support nonpublic special education schools operating in conjunction with licensed RTCs, allowing grants for:

- Classroom and facility renovations
- Safety and accessibility upgrades
- Technology and infrastructure modernization
- Renovation of residential cottages
- New construction necessary to meet Departmental standards

For Sheppard Pratt, this bill directly supports long-identified needs at our Towson campus school, which serves students living at the Sheppard Pratt School & Residential Treatment Center. The current building is among the oldest structures on campus, dating to the late 1800s, and requires significant modernization to meet contemporary therapeutic, educational, and safety standards.

These improvements are not cosmetic. They are essential for:

- **Student Safety & Trauma-Responsive Environments**
 - Our adolescents include survivors of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and trafficking. Research-based models (including TF-CBT) require safe, predictable, calming environments. Structural limitations (aging HVAC, poor acoustics, insufficient natural light, outdated multi-occupancy spaces) directly impede treatment and can escalate crises.
- **Compliance with Modern Standards**
 - Maryland’s residential and educational regulations increasingly emphasize single-occupancy rooms, improved sightlines, environmental risk mitigation, and upgraded accessibility features. HB854 enables upgrades necessary to meet these evolving expectations.
- **Improved Education Outcomes**
 - Students placed under §8-406 require individualized and small-group learning environments. Modern classrooms, appropriate sensory spaces, and integrated technology are central to academic performance, high school credit attainment, and successful reintegration into home and community schools.
- **Statewide System Capacity**
 - For many reasons (including workforce shortages, emergency department boarding, and insufficient step-down placements), access to RTCs remains critically constrained across Maryland. Modernizing the environment at RTC-connected schools expands safe bed capacity, reduces placement delays, and supports shorter, more clinically effective lengths of stay.

Why This Program Is a Forward-Looking Investment for Maryland

Although HB854 is limited this year to RTC-connected nonpublic special education schools, the bill importantly establishes a framework for the General Assembly to understand and support the capital needs of all Maryland nonpublic special education schools.

At present, these schools rely heavily on bond bills, which are unpredictable, one-time, and administratively burdensome. HB854 lays the groundwork for a future statewide capital pathway better aligned with:

- Health and safety requirements
- Accessibility mandates
- Security and emergency preparedness needs
- Long-term sustainability of behavioral health and special education capacity

Sheppard Pratt strongly supports this direction and encourages policymakers to explore future expansions.

HB854 is a thoughtful and strategic approach to ensuring that Maryland’s most vulnerable students learn in facilities that are safe, modern, and clinically appropriate. For Sheppard Pratt,

and for programs operated by our colleagues at Benedictine, Woodbourne, and Villa Maria, this bill will make a tangible difference in the lives of children who depend on these services every day.

For these reasons, Sheppard Pratt respectfully urges a favorable report on House Bill 854.

Thank you for your consideration.