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Seeking the Green Party nomination for Governor  
HB0962  
FAV

School board races are where outside money gets the best return on investment in American politics. Turnout is low. Attention is scarce. Organized interest groups have learned that a few thousand dollars in a school board race can deliver more influence than the same money spent anywhere else. The math is straightforward: when fewer people are paying attention, each dollar buys more.

Maryland is still expanding democratic governance of its schools. Baltimore City had an appointed school board for nearly two centuries. The General Assembly passed HB 558 in 2016 to add the city's first elected seats, and those members took office in January 2023. Baltimore is three years into elected school board representation and still has only 2 elected seats out of 12. As Maryland expands democratic participation in education governance, public financing should be built into the foundation, not bolted on years later after the money patterns are already set.

This is not a hypothetical concern. Sarah Reckhow, Jeffrey Henig, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Jamie Alter Litt at Michigan State and Columbia University conducted one of the first large-scale empirical studies of outside money in school board elections. They found that "local arenas can serve as important battlegrounds in national politics, penetrated by networks of outside donors and organizations who see local elections as critical contests over competing visions of education." National organizations have figured out that school board races are strategic targets. Community-rooted candidates need the tools to compete against that.

That pattern is already here in Maryland. In 2024, the 1776 Project PAC endorsed 19 candidates across 9 of Maryland's 24 school districts and spent roughly \$90,000 supporting 13 of them. All three of their candidates won in Calvert County, giving the PAC's slate control of the board.

Maryland's nearly 900,000 public school students deserve school boards that answer to parents, teachers, students and communities, not to whoever funded the campaign. That is the structural problem HB0962 addresses.

The state has run a public campaign financing program for gubernatorial races since 1974. My running mate Owen Silverman Andrews and I are participating in that program. It works. Candidates who use public financing spend less time with big donors and more time talking to voters. They also do not need to coordinate with PACs or outside spending groups, which breaks the link between organized money and candidate behavior. Public financing does not guarantee that candidates who use it will win. It means the race turns on the candidates and their ideas, not on who has more money.

HB0962 extends that same logic to the county level, specifically to elected members of county boards of education. It authorizes counties to establish local public campaign financing systems. Counties opt in. No county is required to participate. This is enabling legislation that creates the legal authority for counties to act and lets each county design a program that fits its own context.

This committee has already heard from me on HB0568, which would extend public financing to state delegates and senators, and I testified in favor of HB0584, the Clean Democracy Amendment. HB0962 is the same argument applied locally. If public financing is worth doing for the legislature and the governor, it is worth doing for county school boards.

The Green Party supports public campaign financing at every level of government. We benefit when money is a lower barrier to entry. But the case for this bill does not rest on what helps third parties. School boards hire superintendents, set budgets, and shape curriculum for nearly 900,000 Maryland students. Those decisions should be made by officials who answer to voters, not to whoever wrote the largest check to their campaign.

I encourage this committee to provide a favorable report on HB0962.