



126 of 821 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: Fight over city schools promised;
Baltimore leaders criticize state takeover proposal;
CITY SCHOOLS TAKEOVER

BYLINE: LIZ BOWIE, JILL ROSEN AND SARA NEUFELD, SUN REPORTERS

BODY:

As the State Board of Education voted to seize control of 11 Baltimore middle and high schools, city leaders erupted with anger yesterday and promised a fight to block the takeover through court or legislative action.

Around a city often divided by squabbles over how to fix broken schools, parents, students, ministers and elected officials gathered to speak in unified protest against what they see as an unwarranted and politically motivated action in an election year.

"We're ready to do whatever it takes in order to defend the right of the people of Baltimore to control their own children's education, whether that plays out in court or whether that plays out in the legislature," Mayor Martin O'Malley said on the steps of the school headquarters on North Avenue.

In Annapolis last night, Baltimore's legislators and state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick began screaming at each other about the breakdown of what had been a city-state partnership to run the schools. City delegates are expected to introduce legislation this morning that would require Grasmick to get legislative approval before she can take control of a school.

Where the legal challenges might end was not clear. Grasmick's authority for the takeover is clearly laid out in Maryland statute, but the legislature could vote to take away that power. The question would then become whether the U.S. Department of Education might challenge the legislative action.

Chad Colby, a spokesman for the federal department, said his agency hasn't faced the question before. Yesterday's action in Maryland is believed to be the first time a state has moved to take over schools under the four-year-old No Child Left Behind Act. "Everything is hypothetical," Colby said.

Amid the outcry, Grasmick had few vocal defenders, but they were powerful ones. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and

Fight over city schools promised; Baltimore leaders criticize state takeover proposal; CITY SCHOOLS TAKEOVER
The Baltimore Sun March 30, 2006 Thursday Correction Appended

U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Ray Simon offered their support.

Standing on the steps of the State House, Ehrlich sharply criticized the years of poor performance of Baltimore's schools and said the state had no choice but to act.

"This is about kids who for years and years and years have not received their constitutional rights," Ehrlich said. "It's not about short-term political calculations. It's about a system that continues to receive more dollars and becomes more dysfunctional."

Simon issued a statement, saying Grasmick and the state board "should be commended for taking historic and decisive action on the side of Baltimore's students."

Within hours after the state board voted yesterday morning, about 150 people convened around a podium on the white stone steps outside city school system headquarters. There were students and system employees, parents and politicians, activists and alumni of the affected high schools, all there to rally around the city's leadership.

Michael Carter, president of the system's Parent and Community Advisory Board, who just the night before had accused city school officials of not having the best interest of children at heart, stood beside city school board Chairman Brian D. Morris and called the state action a "travesty."

The Rev. Frank Reid of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church asked city residents to pray for the children. Saying "the eyes of the nation" would be upon Baltimore, he called on the governor and mayor to put aside their political differences long enough to work out a partnership for the students' sake.

In Annapolis, city lawmakers angrily denounced the state's action. Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, an East Baltimore Democrat, huddled with aides in the Senate lounge to draft an emergency bill that would require General Assembly approval before a takeover could occur. He said he had garnered support from some of his colleagues in Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

Most Baltimore lawmakers learned of the state's plan by reading about it on a newspaper Web site on their laptop computers as the House of Delegates voted on other matters. Del. Clarence Davis summed up the spirit of the city delegation, saying lawmakers were standing in "total solidarity" in their opposition.

Del. Salima S. Marriott said she considers the takeover political payback because the city circumvented the state when it proposed to bail out the financially strapped schools two years ago.

"This is an act of revenge as far as I'm concerned," Marriott said. "I think that we must take a stand."

For veteran lawmakers, it was a reprise of an earlier state takeover of city schools, albeit on a far larger scale. In 2000, the state gave three city elementaries to a private operator.

Late in the day, the city delegation met for three hours, sitting down first with city schools chief Bonnie S. Copeland and then with Grasmick for an extremely tense and at times testy session. In a small conference room in the House of Delegates office building, lawmakers fired one question after another at the state superintendent, asking for her definition of "partnership," why she chose to do this now, why she blindsided them with the news and why she can't communicate with them.

Senator McFadden, at one point, pounded his hand hard onto the wooden desk, shouting, "You know why I'm really upset? Our children are in the middle of this."

Sen. Lisa A. Gladden told Grasmick said, "We can dance around this all we want, but this is politics."

Grasmick insisted that she was not motivated by politics and that she's doing this because she cares about

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The Baltimore Sun March 30, 2006 Thursday Correction Appended

Baltimore's children. "I feel like I'm the culprit when I come here," she added.

"Have we been hostile to you?" asked Sen. Adrienne A. Jones. "You have to talk with people. You have to develop relationships with the leaders of Baltimore City."

"It's a two-way street," Grasmick replied, her voice rising as she complained about the legislation being drafted to stop her. "Did you tell me about that?"

Other voices raised throughout the day were calmer and more measured.

"We would question whether a unilateral move like this will be best for the children," said Bebe Verdery, education reform director at the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland, noting that the school system had been planning to make major changes at all four high schools being taken over.

Verdery, whose organization is involved in a long-running lawsuit against the state over inadequate school funding, said Maryland treats its other 23 school systems with more courtesy than it has shown Baltimore. "It is inconceivable to me that [the state] would treat any other jurisdiction the way this school system is being treated," she said.

Robert C. Embry Jr., president of the Abell Foundation, questioned why the state had not allowed time for the public or city school officials to see its proposal and comment before yesterday's action.

He also said the city schools had made significant progress in the past several years, noting that the high school graduation rate had risen from 42 percent in 1996 to 59 percent last year.

"I don't think this action is necessary. I think the system is progressing," he said.

At yesterday morning's state school board meeting, the vote was unanimous on most of the issues. The lone dissenting voice was Dunbar Brooks of Baltimore County, the board's vice president, who voted against turning control of the four high schools - Frederick Douglass, Northwestern, Patterson and Southwestern No. 412 - over to the state.

Brooks, a Douglass graduate, said he strongly supports overhauling the management of the four schools, but he said that "at all costs" he wants the city system to develop the ability to educate its students on its own.

Grasmick responded that the situation at the high schools is particularly urgent because in 2009 the state will start denying diplomas to students who can't pass exams in English, algebra, biology and government. The pass rates on those exams have been dismal at the four schools. At Douglass, for instance, 4.8 percent of students passed the algebra test last year.

"We cannot allow students to be denied high school diplomas ... because the system is not providing quality instruction," she said.

All the other actions that the state board took against the city schools yesterday were approved unanimously. Grasmick said the moves are "among the most significant actions" the board has ever taken.

State board President Edward L. Root said afterward that the board cannot allow the city school system to continue to "handicap a student for life" and to relegate them to the "bottom economic rungs of our society."

The board is requiring 11 schools to overhaul their management, either by contracting with a third party or converting to charter schools, public schools that operate independently. Contracting with a third-party entity to run a school would be similar to creating a charter school, with two key differences: Charter schools in Maryland must be operated by nonprofits, and their teachers must belong to a union.

The outside entities running the four high schools would contract with and report to the state, while those running

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the seven middle schools would remain under the jurisdiction of the city school board. The middle schools are Calverton, Chinquapin, Diggs-Johnson, Dr. Roland N. Patterson, Hamilton, Thurgood Marshall and William H. Lemmel.

All 11 of the schools have been on the state watch list for persistently low test scores since at least 1997. Their new management structures will not take effect until the summer of 2007. Grasmick said planning is to begin immediately, but she expects it will take all of next school year to ensure the transition goes smoothly.

By next school year, the school system will have to implement curriculum being used in a successful neighboring county - likely Anne Arundel or Howard - in middle and high school core subjects. Among other reforms, the system must assign case managers to students with chronic behavior problems, develop individual plans for high school students at risk of failing the state graduation exams and work with the state to develop leadership training for principals at schools with low test scores.

Copeland's chief of staff, Douglass Austin, criticized the state for requiring those interventions, saying most of them were things city school officials had said they would do in their updated master plan for school improvement.

Copeland said the four high schools stand to lose substantial money from foundations supporting the city's efforts to make its high schools smaller.

"To have the state decide that these schools can no longer be Baltimore schools ... to me is just tragic," she said.

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For developments in the state's proposed takeover of 11 city schools and archived coverage of the city school crisis, go to baltimoresun.com/cityschools.

The state's plan

Here is what is in store for 11 city schools under the state plan:

Starting this spring, outside companies and nonprofits will submit proposals to manage the schools.

By January, state officials will select managers. Transition plans will begin.

By summer 2007, the schools will be turned over to the new managers.

The managers will decide which staff to keep and where to hire new people.

[State Department of Education]

THE COVERAGE

POLITICS Takeover will undoubtedly affect how Martin O'Malley's education message is received, political experts say. pg 7A

REACTION Students, teachers, administrators and alumni struggle to understand the ramifications. pg 7A

RESULTS No clear record of success with similar takeovers. pg 7A

Fight over city schools promised; Baltimore leaders criticize state takeover proposal; CITY SCHOOLS TAKEOVER
The Baltimore Sun March 30, 2006 Thursday Correction Appended

>>>Online For developments in the state's proposed takeover of 11 city schools, and archived coverage of the city school crisis, go to baltimoresun.com/cityschools.

NOTES: SEE HARD COPY FOR CITY SCHOOLS CHRONOLOGY

CORRECTION:

A Page 1A article yesterday misidentified a lawmaker who confronted state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick over a proposed state takeover of 11 Baltimore schools. The lawmaker was Sen. Verna L. Jones, a Baltimore Democrat. The Sun regrets the error.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) / CHART(S)

1. Martin O'Malley, with Bonnie S. Copeland, said he would fight a takeover of schools through the courts or legislature. 2. Frederick Douglass junior Jerelle Jones, 17, says he thinks the school, one the state wants to take over, is doing a good job. 3. Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden and state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick (right) continue a heated exchange. JoAnne Carter, an assistant superintendent, is center. In Annapolis last night, Grasmick and state legislators screamed at each other about the breakdown of a city-state partnership to run the schools. 4. City schools chief Bonnie S. Copeland, Mayor Martin O'Malley and city school board Chairman Brian D. Morris react to the takeover proposal. 5. NANCY S. GRASMICK 6. ROBERT L. EHRLICH JR.

1. JOHN MAKELY : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER 2. KENNETH K. LAM : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER 3. KIM HAIRSTON : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER 4. JOHN MAKELY : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

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