

# Overhaul of Troubled School Board Gains

## Bill to Add Appointed Members Clears Hurdle in Pr. George's House Delegation

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An effort to restructure the Prince George's Board of Education by adding four appointed members gained steam yesterday, winning approval from a panel of the county's legislative delegation in Annapolis.

Delegates who supported the bill said it would help bring more accountability to the school board, which oversees a struggling, 132,000-student school system that ranks second-to-last on state exams.

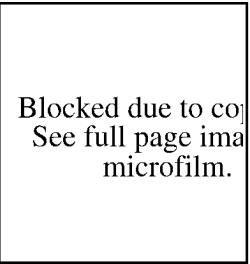
The bill also could appease legislative leaders who want to see some change on the fractious board before deciding how much state money to grant the district.

But school board members blasted the idea, saying appointed members would create confusion and take away voters' rights. "I feel this is a really big mistake," said board Vice Chairman Catherine A. Smith (Cheverly), who spoke in defense of the current nine-member elected board before the vote by the subcommittee of the county's House delegation. "My constituents are going to be mad."

The school board has been criticized by officials and residents for various problems, including a scandal over expense accounts and bickering between members and Superintendent Iris T. Metts over issues as trivial as where she sits during meetings.

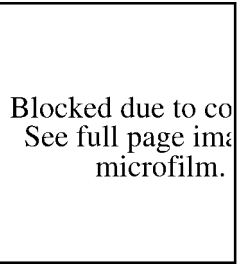
The bill, first proposed by Del. James W. Hubbard (D-Prince George's) and amended several times, would add four appointed members immediately to the board, creating a 13-member panel until the next elections, in November 2002. The appointed members would be required to have some expertise in education and would be named by Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) and Prince George's County Executive Wayne K. Curry (D).

For the 2002 school board elections, the county would be divided into five districts in which board members could run for reelection—meaning only five elected representatives would emerge to join the four appointed members.



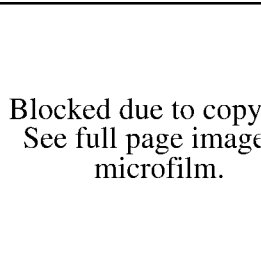
FILE PHOTO

**Del. Rushern L. Baker III** said the changes would help the schools.



FILE PHOTO

**Board Chairman Kenneth E. Johnson** warned of confusion.



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**Sen. Paul G. Pinsky** wants more attention paid to instruction.

"To the residents, we're saying this will benefit the education system, which is clearly not working now," said Del. Rushern L. Baker III (D), the Prince George's House delegation chairman, who supports the bill.

If approved by the county's full House delegation tomorrow, the bill still would need to win approval from county senators, who are less enthusiastic about the idea of appointed members.

The District recently adopted a hybrid school board of appointed and elected members, a move that supporters said would stabilize the board as it moved to strengthen city schools.

"Some of the finger-pointing and posturing toward the board is real easy, but there are a lot of other dynamics going on," said state Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Prince George's). "Is the reality a shortage of funding? With all the debate about management . . . there has not been much discussion about instruction."

Metts and school board Chairman Kenneth E. Johnson (Mitchellville) have argued that the system will not improve until it receives more money. The board has requested a \$1.1 billion budget for next school year, but Curry recently said the system will have to make do with about \$100 million less than requested.

The bill also would require Metts to revise the school system's five-year master plan, first drafted

three years ago by her predecessor, Jerome Clark. And it would require Metts and the board to give information to a state-appointed oversight panel before making policy decisions; the oversight panel would have 30 days to reply.

"It doesn't make sense," Johnson said. "Anybody can add two and two together and see they're adding more confusion to a board they perceive to already be in confusion."

The eight-member legislative subcommittee voted 6 to 1, with one absence, to forward the bill tomorrow to the county delegation. Democratic Dels. Barbara Frush, Melony Griffith, Brian R. Moe, Joan B. Pitkin and James E. Proctor Jr. joined Hubbard in supporting the bill. Del. Carolyn J.B. Howard (D), an employee of the school system, voted against it. Del. Obie Patterson (D), the subcommittee chairman, abstained.

Some legislators say much of the impetus for the bill came from Johnson's appearance at a hearing of the House Appropriations Committee last month, during which he sparred with the committee chairman, Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore).

Rawlings said he would like to see an all-appointed board in Prince George's. Some county delegates said they are attempting to show him that they are dealing with his concerns in the hope that he won't withhold state funds from the county.