



Maryland POLICY REPORT

No. 2006-7

June 12, 2006

BALTIMORE CITY SCHOOLS TAKEOVER SIGNALS THE NEED FOR MORE CHOICE IN EDUCATION

KIRK A. JOHNSON, PH.D.

The 2005–2006 school year has been tumultuous for Baltimore City Schools, which prompts reflection about what policies should be enacted so the next school year can be better for children in Baltimore’s public schools.

“NOTHING HAS IMPROVED”

Obvious frustration with Baltimore City’s school system reached its apex this year when Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. announced that the state department of education would take over seven of the city’s middle schools and four of its high schools that have been persistently failing for years and even decades. These schools are the particularly dysfunctional ones in a city where the majority of students are not getting a decent education.

A quick analysis of the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) test scores for 2005 show this persuasively. Citywide, only 40 percent of Baltimore’s eighth graders are considered proficient or better in reading, and an even more heartbreaking 19.5 percent of these children are proficient or better in math. For comparison, 2005 statewide eighth grade

reading and math proficiency rates are 66.4 percent and 51.7 percent, respectively.¹

Little wonder, then, that State Superintendent Nancy Grasmick declared, “The reality is the recent test results demonstrate nothing has improved.”² For in excess of a decade, an academic malaise has pervaded the school district where students are either passed through from grade-to-grade without being sufficiently educated, or drop out entirely. Many policymakers, both inside and outside Baltimore, are understandably frustrated with the current system.

STATE TAKEOVER AND NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Policy options for dealing with failing schools became more explicit with the advent of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. With NCLB, states and localities essentially entered into a bargain with the federal government on school accountability. In consideration of federal financial support, largely in the form of Title I dollars,³ schools have been required to show “adequate yearly progress” (AYP)

1. MSA results downloaded from http://mdk12.org/data/msa_analyzing/index.asp.

2. Thomas Dennison, “Ehrlich Senses Win in Schools Takeover,” *The Gazette*, April 7, 2006, at www.gazette.net/stories/040706/polia%20s194223_31954.

in moving all students towards academic proficiency in the core subjects of math and reading. This certainly has not happened in large parts of Baltimore City, and has been especially bad at the 11 targeted schools.

For persistently failing schools—those that fail to meet AYP for five or more years—states have a choice of how to restructure dysfunctional schools. According to a report from the Education Commission of the States, they may:

- Reopen the school as a public charter school
- Replace all or most of the school staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure to make AYP
- Enter into a contract with an entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the public school
- Turn the operation of the school over to the state educational agency, if permitted under state law and agreed to by the state
- Enact any other major restructuring of the school's governance arrangement that makes fundamental reforms, such as significant changes in the school's staffing and governance⁴

The Ehrlich Administration pursued the fourth option and moved to take over these 11 persistently failing schools, much to the dismay of local Baltimore City officials who obviously do not want to lose control of their system. But someone has to be first. Rather than exhibit outrage by pushing for a moratorium on the takeovers, Baltimore school officials should be lauding the decision as the measure to protect their students from the ravages of a system severely lacking in positive outcomes for children.

Paul E. Schurick, Gov. Ehrlich's communications director, dubbed the situation "a true educational catastrophe in the Baltimore City schools," and he is correct. Former Baltimore mayor and now State Comptroller William Donald Schaefer furthered the commentary by offering, "It didn't happen overnight."⁵ These problems have been persistent and now something must be done about it.

Even so, many state legislators in Annapolis this past session did not want to take such strong action. They passed a moratorium on the state takeover for a year, and overrode Gov. Ehrlich's subsequent veto. Recently, the city school board announced that most staff will have to reapply for their jobs at four failing Baltimore schools, but according to the *Baltimore Sun*, no teachers will actually lose their jobs; rather, they "might be reassigned" elsewhere.⁶

BRINGING CHOICE WHERE THERE IS NONE

A state takeover or other massive restructuring of these failing 11 schools is, without question, needed in the short term. These schools have simply failed children for far too long, and recent proposed reforms may not be sufficient. Alternatively, policymakers may consider these schools as possible targets for outright closure, as they may not be needed in a school system that is shrinking.⁷

What is critically needed over the long term, however, is more choice for students, building on the charter schools already available to some city students. The second part of Nancy Grasmick's quote on the current mess is noteworthy. "[N]o child should have to attend a failing school by accident of where that child lives."⁸ Unfortunately, this is too often the case in Baltimore City.

Parents should be empowered to choose the best school for their children. Undoubtedly, for many

3. In Fiscal Year 2005, Baltimore City received roughly \$57.6 million, or about a third of the total state Title I allocation. See www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/titlei/fy05/maryland.pdf.

4. Lisa Snell, "Chronically Failing Schools Face Weak Sanctions," *School Reform News*, December 1, 2005, at www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=18087. Also see Education Commission of the States, "State Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act," p. 45, 2004, at www.ecs.org/html/Special/NCLB/ReportToTheNation/docs/Indicator_3.pdf.

5. Dennison, "Ehrlich Senses Win in Schools Takeover," *The Gazette*, April 7, 2006.

6. Sara Neufeld, "Jobs Up for Grabs at 4 Schools," *Baltimore Sun*, May 30, 2006.

7. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary Districts in the United States," Baltimore City lost more than 11 percent of its student population between the 1991–1992 and 2001–2002 school years. See http://nces.ed.gov/Pubs2003/100_largest/index.asp for more.

8. Dennison, "Ehrlich Senses Win in Schools Takeover" *The Gazette*, April 7, 2006.

parents this will be a public school, although not necessarily the one that is geographically closest to their homes. The choices should also include more independent charter schools, which have had a difficult time getting started in the state, mostly because of a weak chartering law and intransigent local school districts that do not want to see competition encroach on their near-monopoly status.⁹

Parental empowerment in education should also include the ability to take a portion of the average student school expenditure to a private school of the parent's choice. Currently, Baltimore City schools spend in excess of \$9,000 per student on current year or "operational" spending. If parents were able to take, say, \$7,000 to a school of their choice, that amount would be sufficient to pay for private school tuition and fees in all but the most exclusive private schools operating in the city.¹⁰

For example, \$7,000 would not be enough for tuition at, say, the Bryn Mawr School or Boys Latin, but it would be sufficient for tuition at Cardinal Shehan or Greater Grace Christian Academy, two of the larger reasonably priced private schools in the city.

Real school choice would allow money to follow the student to any public, charter, or private school.

Children would be better off, both in their new schools and in their original schools because of this competitive pressure.¹¹

Currently, Baltimore City is failing its students because there is no real incentive to change, and the current flap with the governor's office demonstrates this clearly. In 1995, the city filed a lawsuit against the state, seeking more money to fix its ailing schools. The state quickly cited poor management, not funding, as the root of the school district's problems. Today in 2006, when the state moved to finally take over some of the worst performers, the effort was stymied by the legislature. All the while, the children trapped in Baltimore's public schools are the real victims of inaction.

Until parents, instead of bureaucrats, are truly able to choose the best and safest schools for their children, this pattern will continue. More than a generation of students in Baltimore city has now been lost to this failed system. Only via true choice in education will this trend be reversed.

—Kirk A. Johnson Ph.D. is adjunct fellow of the Maryland Public Policy Institute and senior policy analyst at the Center for Data Analysis, the Heritage Foundation.

9. For more on this, see Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., "How to Strengthen Maryland's Charter Law," *Maryland Policy Report* No. 2005-03, April 11, 2005, at www.mdpolicy.org/docLib/20051028_policyupdate20053.pdf.

10. More details on such a plan for Baltimore City has been written by Dan Lips, "A School Voucher Program for Baltimore City," July 2005, at www.mdpolicy.org/docLib/20051112_BaltimoreVoucherStudy.pdf.

11. Research from Harvard has shown how this competitive pressure works. See Caroline Hoxby, "Rising Tide" *Education Next*, Winter 2001, at www.educationnext.org/20014/68.html.