

# BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

January 5, 2018

The Sun's editors had it right when they described the circumstances leading up to this week's facilities issues in City Schools as complicated, with no easy solutions ("Baltimore City schools' deep freeze"). Many factors have been many years in the making—something The Sun's subsequent article doesn't acknowledge in its misleading description of the district's use of funding for maintenance ("Baltimore schools have returned millions in state funds for heating repairs").

While the intention may have been to promote efficient use of funds, the state's past funding practice has disadvantaged the state's poorest school district—and has contributed to City Schools losing millions of dollars. Here's why.

Our more affluent neighbors have local funding sources they can tap to pay for large projects like replacing outdated heating systems. Baltimore County, for example, has \$116 million this year. Here in Baltimore City, where there are many competing capital demands for aging infrastructure, we have \$17 million allocated for school capital costs.

When other school districts submit their requests to the state, they are often asking for dollars that will reimburse actual costs for projects that are underway or even finished. Here in Baltimore City, we don't have that luxury. We ask the state for dollars based on estimates of what projects will cost in the future, leading to challenges particularly when the state provides dollars in increments over time.

Imagine you're a homeowner whose house needs a new roof. You get an estimate. It's a lot of money, and you're not wealthy. The bank gives you a loan, but they don't give you the money all at once. Two or three or four years later, you have enough. But the price of shingles has gone up, and when the roofers start pulling off the old roof, they discover a lot more rotten wood. Now, you've spent years patching the roof, you don't have the money to cover the new higher cost, and the bank is calling in your loan.

City Schools has multiple roofs—not to mention furnaces, pipes, insulation, and windows—that need attention. When our estimates go up, we often don't have enough to pay the extra costs and have to cancel projects and return the portion of funding we've received. The money is held in an account for future projects, but in recent years the state has counted a portion of it toward our annual allocation, reducing the amount of new funding we receive—to a total of \$66 million in the past ten years.

The state has agreed that its practices have posed challenges for us. We are working together to make improvements, and the state has agreed to discontinue providing incremental funding for projects, which has contributed to recycling returned dollars to offset reductions in new allocations.

Meanwhile, the district's 21st Century School Buildings Program has allowed us to break the cycle for the schools covered under the first phase of the plan, using a separate funding process to build or renovate the sorts of buildings our students and our city deserve. The support of state and city lawmakers and the advocacy of our dedicated families and partners made this possible, but the Sun's editors rightly point out that the funding allocated isn't nearly enough. And it should also be pointed out that the \$66 million returned to the state includes dollars for schools that subsequently came under the 21<sup>st</sup>-century plan—that is, using good financial stewardship, we returned funds for projects at buildings that subsequently were scheduled for renovation or replacement using this different funding process.

As The Sun's editors noted, it's complicated—and it's part of the long-term underfunding of Baltimore's schools, which by the state's own estimates amounts to a shortfall of more than \$290 million a year.

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