

# The Abell Report

*What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about*

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## **Baltimore City's School Buildings Not Making the Grade: Nearly 9 in 10 Need Modernization to Accelerate Academic Gains**

### *New ACLU Report Highlights Need: Four Recommendations for Getting the Job Done*

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**R**ecent reforms in Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) appear to be gaining traction and producing welcome improvements in student achievement and success. Enrollment has increased by several thousand students in the past two years, ending many decades of pupil loss. Educators are replacing unsuccessful programs with innovative ones, and bringing new resources and organizational partnerships into the system. Test scores are on the rise, and for the school year 2008-09, 1,000 fewer students dropped out compared to two years ago. These gains coincide with increased operating funds under the state's Bridge to Excellence commitment, demonstrating that investment in education brings real returns.

Clearly, there is still work to be done to continue instructional reforms and academic gains for children in Baltimore City Public Schools, and to contribute to the health and well-being of Baltimore City itself. Studies show that the quality of local schools is a significant factor in families' decisions about where to live, and businesses' decisions about where to locate. Better schools offer Baltimore the opportunity to share the nationwide influx of new residents and families seeking a more exciting—and urban—living experience and proximity to their jobs. Many young professionals continue to move into Baltimore City, and the degree to which they enroll their children in the city's public schools, rather than private ones, will be a significant indicator of municipal prosperity and growth.

While instructional improvement, recruitment, and retention of talented teachers, and student performance will remain cornerstones of public school success, there is a fourth cornerstone worthy of additional consideration: modernized, supportive, and inspiring physical facilities in which learning takes place. Many of Baltimore City's school facilities are inadequate to support the demands of a 21st century curriculum, which could significantly compromise the future academic progress of city students. The ACLU's new report, "Buildings for Academic Excellence" (June 2010), provides a detailed look into the condition of City Schools' facilities and urgently asks city, state, and federal officials, and the greater Baltimore community, to act now to improve the substandard physical condition of City Schools' buildings.

Indeed, education and urban researchers already are focusing on the value of new or fully renovated school buildings not only as a visible and welcoming metaphor for thriving city neighborhoods, but also as substantive aids to what goes on inside each classroom every day. School buildings that are inviting and warm, with bright hallways; transparent windows; well-equipped library, computer, and recreational facilities; good heating, cooling, and electrical systems; and properly maintained roofs and furnishings send a powerful message to students, faculty, and communities about the value placed on education. In contrast, research has

shown that schools in poor condition are linked to lower student achievement and increased absenteeism and drop-out rates. Reports have also shown that school districts with old and deficient facilities may compromise the health and safety of staff and students, and complicate the recruitment and retention of high quality teachers.

Decades of inadequate funding have led to the deficient conditions seen in City Schools' buildings today. In 2010, Baltimore City Public Schools estimated the cost of modernizing its schools to be \$2.8 billion. In recent years, state and city leaders have recognized the enormous school infrastructure needs and have directed somewhat more capital funding toward school improvements. However, current funding streams still fall far short of addressing the cost of a full-scale modernization; therefore, a new and innovative approach is needed. For the well-being of students, teachers, and the community at large, Baltimore City and state leaders must understand that high quality school facilities are integral to education reform, and make this issue a higher priority.

At a time when Baltimore City's public schools are poised to sustain and enhance progress, it's worthwhile to look more closely at some of the research suggesting the benefits of increased investment in upgraded school buildings and campuses, to analyze the adequacy of current funding streams for school improvements, to examine the

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relevant experiences of other urban school systems, and to explore some possible means of addressing the challenge of deficient school facilities in Baltimore City. It's also worthwhile to explore some arguments for a school facilities renewal plan that is comprehensive in scope, and ambitious in terms of its timetable. While risk-taking and innovation are never guarantors of success, an overreliance on historic piecemeal approaches to school facility improvement may prove to be the riskiest path of all.

## **WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS**

Numerous studies show that school buildings in poor physical condition negatively impact student academic achievement. In this report, the ACLU of Maryland presents research studies by Dr. Glen Earthman and other experts that highlight the most critical school-facility factors with demonstrable impact on achievement, and the health and safety of students and school staff.

### **Human Comfort**

As early as 1931, a report by the New York Commission on Ventilation indicated that the thermal environment in classrooms had a significant impact on student achievement. Over the next 80 years, follow-up studies have confirmed these findings and further suggested that appropriate heating and cooling are the most important environmental factors that impact student academic achievement. Student productivity, efficiency, and test scores have been found to be significantly lower in classroom environments that were outside of the human comfort zone (~67-74°F). Several studies have shown that students in non air-conditioned buildings perform lower on tests than students in air-conditioned

buildings. There is also evidence suggesting that the thermal environment has a cumulative effect; the longer students attend school in air-conditioned buildings, the higher their achievement scores will be over time.

### **Adequate Lighting**

Studies suggest that adequate lighting in classrooms is the second most important environmental factor in optimal student achievement. Students in modern classrooms that received substantial natural daylight progressed significantly faster in math and reading than students exposed to much smaller amounts of daylight. Students in modernized classrooms with the most amounts of light scored between 7 percent and 18 percent higher on tests. Higher student absentee rates have also been correlated with facility deficiencies such as poor lighting and inadequate ventilation.

### **Acoustical Environment**

Noise distraction in the classroom has been linked in some research with lower achievement. It is possible to mitigate distracting noise from students in gymnasiums, music rooms, crowded hallways, and classrooms. Other potential targets for noise abatement include loud noise from traffic and outside activity coming in through opened windows, due to a lack of air-conditioning.

### **Difficulty in Attracting and Retaining Teachers**

Studies also show that schools in poor physical conditions adversely affect teacher satisfaction, retention, and success. Not surprisingly, teachers who work in facilities in disrepair are more likely to leave because of poor working conditions. Surveys in Chicago and Washington, DC, found that more than 40 percent of teachers who rated the condition of their school with a "C" or

below considered changing schools, and 30 percent thought about leaving teaching altogether due to poor conditions. Though the percentage of highly qualified teachers in City Schools increased sharply in 2008-09, the figure still stands at only 69 percent. Improved facilities are a reasonable way to attract more highly qualified teachers and improve teacher retention in City Schools.

### **Health and Safety Considerations**

Baltimore's school buildings are the oldest in Maryland and many are equipped with outdated and faulty mechanical systems. Proper ventilation systems prevent the accumulation of contaminants that come from people's exhalations and skin, building materials and cleaning products, human care products such as shampoo and deodorant, and pathogens that reside in carpets and bathrooms. Schools are on average more densely populated than other buildings, requiring greater need for adequate ventilation systems.

Inadequate ventilation systems can lead to poor Indoor Air Quality (IAQ), which is a recognized potential health threat to those who teach and learn in school buildings. Studies suggest that poor IAQ can lead to so-called "sick building syndrome" and exacerbate asthma, which has been linked with a decrease in student and teacher productivity and increased absences. (Baltimore City students have a higher rate of asthma than children statewide; 80 percent of students enrolled in Baltimore City's Children's Health Initiative Program suffer from asthma.)

A good central air-conditioning system can mitigate the ill effects of poor IAQ. In fact, some Maryland school systems have installed central air-conditioning systems in all of their schools, to ensure that the thermal environment and IAQ is optimal for the well being of

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teachers and students. For example, school facilities in Anne Arundel and Howard counties are fully air-conditioned, compared to only 50 percent of school buildings in Baltimore City—and half of these cooling systems are old and require frequent maintenance to keep them operational. (City Schools’ officials estimate that it would cost about \$276 million to retrofit all City Schools’ buildings for air-conditioning, not including the cost of replacing or repairing existing and problematic air-conditioning systems.)

Potable water, fire safety, adequate lavatories, and security systems are also issues of concern. Water fountains in City Schools have been shut off due to the old plumbing systems that carry harmful contaminants such as lead. Lacking the funding to install new plumbing systems, City Schools provide bottled water to students.

### The Scope of the Issue and Financial Considerations

Baltimore City Public Schools operate 162 buildings and manage the oldest schools in the state. Nearly 45 percent of Baltimore’s schools were built prior to 1970. Another 33 percent of Baltimore’s schools were built 30 to 40 years ago. Just 3 percent of City Schools have been newly renovated in the past 10 years. According to the school system’s 2010 Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan (draft), approximately 70 percent of the buildings are judged by industry measures to be in “poor” condition. Over the decades, state and city capital funding has been used mostly for limited repairs of critical systemic facility deficiencies to keep the buildings functional.

In May 2010, City Schools reported that the required renovations and building replacements in its Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan (draft) were estimated to cost \$2.8 billion. While there has been progress in recent years, the total current need—and

the rate at which buildings are falling into disrepair—are outpacing current funding resources. Table 1 summarizes the school system’s projections for the work needed to modernize all City Schools’ buildings: All but 19 of the 162 school buildings have been recommended for moderate/major renovation, or for new construction.

Table 1. Summary of Baltimore City Public School’s 2010 Facilities Master Plan	
28	New or Replacement Schools
69	Major Renovations
46	Moderate Renovations
5	Minor Renovations
14	General Maintenance
<b>162</b>	<b>School Buildings Total (Total Estimated Cost = \$2.8 Billion)</b>

Source: Baltimore City Public Schools 2010 Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan (draft)

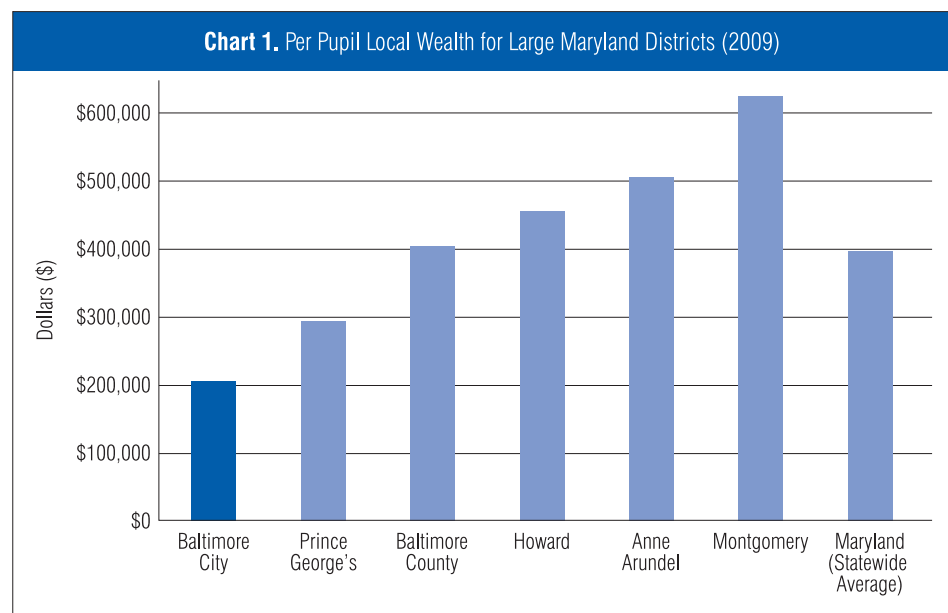
### Current Funding Trends Perpetuate the Disparity in School Facility Conditions Among Maryland Districts

Although annual government funding for Baltimore City school facilities

past five years, city and state funding per year averaged \$18.6 million and \$36.8 million, respectively. Combined with only about \$1.5 million from the federal government, City Schools receives about \$57 million for school facility improvements annually. Under this funding system, City Schools’ buildings will never reach adequacy, and Baltimore City principals will have to continue competing for scarce capital funding for decades to come.

### 1. Baltimore City has much less local wealth than other large districts to invest in school facility improvements.

The largest school districts in Maryland each receive roughly the same amount of school construction aid from the state, putting Baltimore City, with its higher infrastructure need, at a disadvantage. The state uses a formula to measure wealth for each county annually, using taxable income and the value of real and personal property. Due to its limited local wealth, Baltimore City has a smaller local capital budget than other large counties. (See Chart 1)



has been higher in recent years, current annual funding typically allows for only the full renovation of a single large school building and a few dozen critical systemic repair and replacement projects in various schools per year. Over the

### 2. Baltimore City slightly exceeds the state average in the percentage of capital funding it devotes to school infrastructure renovations and repairs.

On average, Maryland districts con-

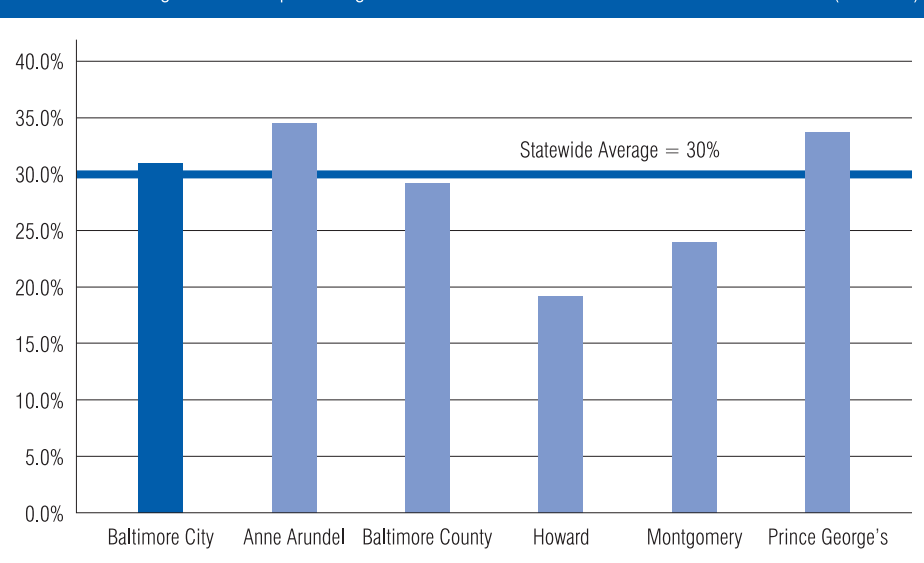
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tribute 30 percent of their total capital budgets to school infrastructure projects. Baltimore City slightly exceeds the statewide average in terms of its effort to improve its facilities. The city's efforts to improve school facilities are on par with other districts; however, the city's low wealth does not allow it to borrow funds to maintain a large capital budget. (See Chart 2)

**3. The state gives similar amounts of capital funding each year to the large districts for school construction and renovation. However, each school system then gets very different amounts of local capital funding in addition to the state funding. The state does not balance out local disparity in funding.**

Annually, each school district submits a list of capital requests to the state and its local government. After the governor sets the amount of capital funding available for school construction, a state panel decides which projects in which counties get state funding. The large school districts historically have

**Chart 2. Percentage of Local Capital Budgets Contributed to School Construction and Renovation (FY07-10)**



school infrastructure needs, can only expect to get about \$19 million from the city, on top of the state allocation. School districts in counties like Baltimore County and Montgomery County have a much greater capacity to borrow and consequently receive larger allocations from their local governments. Chart 3 illustrates the disparity in school facilities capital funding over the past four years. (See Chart 3)

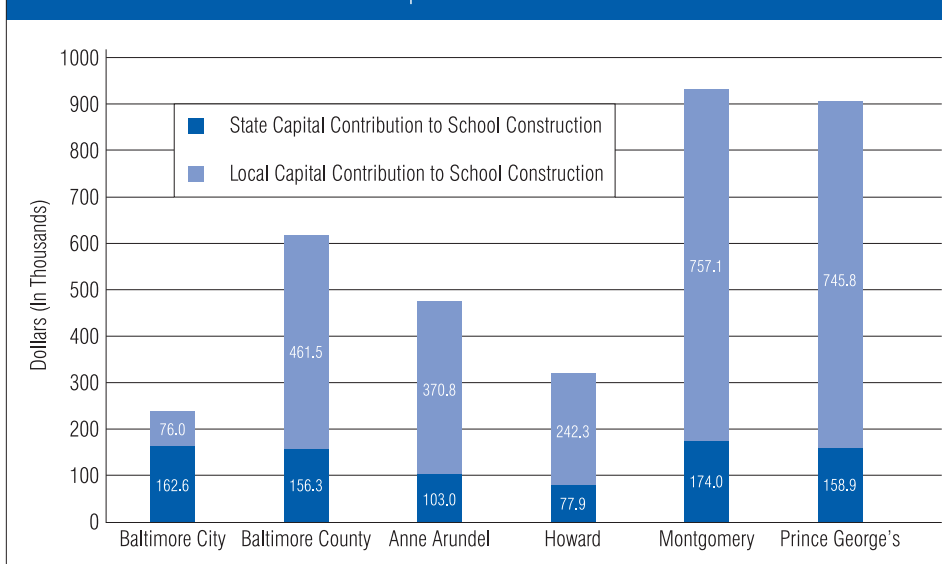
stantial, the benefits could yield a substantial return on such an investment strategy.

**Modernized City School Buildings: Investment Brings Returns**

There is already evidence in Baltimore City that investment in modernizing schools pays off in gains in student achievement and community pride. In 2003, Digital Harbor High School (the former Southern High School) was completely renovated at a cost of approximately \$50 million. This facility has received the greatest number of student applications of any high school, from 2002 through 2008. Students and teachers are drawn to the school's modern facility, which includes wired classrooms, high-tech computer and science labs, and a media center, along with satisfactory heating and cooling systems. Southern High School had a graduation rate below 30 percent and a dropout rate of 16.1 percent. Since the renovation, Digital Harbor boasts a graduation rate close to 90 percent and a 3.3 percent dropout rate.

A similarly encouraging outcome can result from even moderate investment in facilities. Abbottston Elementary School was renovated in 2004 for \$6.4 million. Prior to the renovation, only 6.7 percent of 5th graders at Abbottston were ranked as "advanced"

**Chart 3. Total Local and State Capital Contribution to School Facilities for FY07-10**



received roughly equal amounts of funding, without regard to the total need or wealth of each district. Baltimore's public school system, with the greatest

An alternative option to piecemeal, competitive, or stop-gap funding is to consider a more comprehensive approach. While the financial challenges are sub-

in reading on the Maryland State Assessments (MSA). In MSA math, none of the 5th graders scored in the advanced category in 2003. Since the renovation, Abbottston's academic progress has increased exponentially. In school year 2008-09, Abbottston led the school district in MSA reading with 95 percent of 5th graders ranked as advanced. On the 2009 MSA math, 36 percent of 5th graders scored in the advanced category, 56 percent scored proficient, and only 8 percent scored basic. School leaders credit the renovation, and the message of success it sent, as an integral part of the school's progress.

The turnaround for failing schools involves many strategies such as hiring new leadership and highly qualified teachers, improving the curriculum, and addressing school culture. The principals at Abbottston and Digital Harbor believe that the high quality learning environment was a critical component to their success.

## **BENEFITS TRANSCEND CLASSROOMS**

City Schools are commonly viewed by residents as anchor institutions in any neighborhood. Schools are beacons of hope for children in Baltimore City communities where drugs and violence are oftentimes prevalent. Modernized school facilities can boost morale among students, teachers, and school staff, as well as the community at large. Attractive, functional buildings can be used for neighborhood events and to house services to build stronger communities.

A comprehensive modernization of school buildings could bring long-term economic benefits for Baltimore City because rehabilitated schools enhance neighborhood revitalization efforts by attracting more middle-class families and the businesses that serve them. New "transformation" schools and charter schools are being opened every year, and many of the established public schools in the city have solid reputations.

In recent years, data suggest that several school districts in the United States have seen higher academic scores as a result of their efforts to increase the percentage of middle-income students in their schools. In Wake County, North Carolina, which includes the City of Raleigh, about 64 percent of the low-income high school students passed the state's End-of-Course exams in 2005. Less than 49 percent of low-income high school students passed in Durham and Mecklenburg counties, where schools are less economically integrated.

Finally, investing in a comprehensive school modernization initiative in Baltimore City is likely to create local jobs in the construction sector. Because construction costs for materials and labor have decreased significantly since the slow down of development during the recession, every state in the country has reported winning bids 5 percent to 12 percent below the estimate on construction jobs during the first round of federal stimulus funding. Modernized schools may also reduce the school system's expenditures on utility bills, which are very high at many schools, due to inefficient heating systems, old roofs, and drafty windows.

## **A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH: THREE LOCALITIES THAT TRANSFORMED THEIR SCHOOLS**

Funding a comprehensive school facilities master plan in a large school district is not an easy task. However, there are states, cities, and school districts that have developed creative ways to finance school construction and renovation on a large scale. While the laws and guidelines that determine how a government body can finance or incur debt may differ from state to state, the case studies outlined below suggest that a steadfast political and governmental commitment can bring about innovative solutions to enormous infrastructure problems. Here are three different approaches for the State of Maryland, Baltimore City officials, and the greater Baltimore community to consider:

### **1. The Five-Year Plan – 86 Schools Built or Renovated Using Innovative Financing Greenville, South Carolina**

In November 1998, the school district in Greenville, South Carolina, was in crisis. Most of Greenville's 86 school buildings were in severe disrepair, and about 9,000 of its 61,000 students were spending their days in 440 portable structures. The school district developed a five-year plan to comprehensively modernize all of its facilities for a cost of nearly \$800 million. If completed with traditional bond financing, implementation of the plan would have taken more than 20 years, given the district's \$60 million per year debt limit. Inflation and construction costs would have risen over the years, adding as much as \$1.5 billion on top of the total estimated cost.

Greenville's school board elected to increase its debt capacity and allow for special financing arrangements through an innovative public-private partnership. The result was that Greenville County Schools established a nonprofit organization, BEST (Building Equity Sooner for Tomorrow), which sold \$800 million in bonds to finance the modernization plan. This structure involved the transfer of ownership of the school facilities to the nonprofit, which also managed the construction. The school district used its annual allotment of \$60 million in bonds, over 25 years, to effectively purchase the school buildings back from BEST (Greenville County Schools were already using about \$60 million in bonds annually for facilities). Altogether, half of Greenville's 86 schools were newly built and half received major renovations over five years.

### **2. A State Plays Lead Role in Overhaul of Urban School Facilities New Haven, Connecticut**

In 1995, the mayor of New Haven, Connecticut, launched the Citywide School Construction program, a long-term plan to modernize all New Haven's schools. New Haven has the third-largest school district in the state with about 20,000 students. It operates the

largest school construction program in Connecticut. Most of New Haven's 44 schools will be completely renovated or replaced by 2012, for a total cost of approximately \$1.5 billion. Many elementary and middle school buildings have been converted into pre-K to 8 configurations as part of New Haven's education reform initiatives.

The state uses bonds to fund statewide school facility improvements and has a cost-share formula that covers 20 percent to 80 percent of school construction costs, depending on the local wealth of the district. For each project in New Haven, the state covers 76.6 percent of the total costs. Interdistrict magnet schools, which receive a state reimbursement rate of 95 percent, are also part of the state's education reform efforts. The state's incentive for districts to develop magnet schools was a result of Connecticut's landmark desegregation case *Sheff v. O'Neill*. From 2002 to 2007, Connecticut invested an average of \$551.4 million per year into public school facilities.

New Haven has struggled to meet the 20 percent local match to complete school construction projects. To generate funds, New Haven sold delinquent property tax liens, raising about \$17 million for the School Construction Trust Fund. Other funds came from the sale of city-owned property assets. New Haven also used innovative financing to leverage existing revenue to implement its facilities master plan. Over the past two decades, Connecticut expanded revenue to cover growing expenses in the state, which included but were not limited to school construction. In 1991, a state income tax of 4 percent was established for the first time, and the state legislature recently increased the rate for high-income earners.

The mayor of New Haven also set up a separate entity to manage the Citywide School Construction program, which also ensures public input and oversight in the design, procurement, and imple-

mentation of each project. The school construction program also established provisions to ensure that New Haven residents are hired for the construction jobs.

### **3. Communities Vote to Expand Taxes for New School Buildings State of Georgia**

In Georgia, local school districts had two basic options to improve school buildings: Ask the voters to approve issuance of general obligation bonds to be repaid from property tax revenues, or use current property tax revenues levied for the maintenance and operation of schools to fund capital improvement projects. Both of these options placed the burden for providing adequate local funding for capital improvements solely on property owners.

With limited revenue and increasing demand for building new and renovating old school facilities, a constitutional amendment was approved in November 1996, to allow local school districts (statewide) the option of calling for a county referendum to ask voters to approve a *Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax* (SPLOST). SPLOST revenues were authorized for specific capital improvement projects for educational purposes, to retire outstanding debt, and to issue new bonds for specific capital projects. The local sales tax rate was set at 1 percent, over a period of time not to exceed five years.

Votes in Georgia's 159 counties and 21 city districts resulted in 98 percent of referenda successfully passing. As one example, the DeKalb County School System, with a school population of approximately 100,000 students, operates about 150 schools. DeKalb voters have approved SPLOST for three consecutive terms. From 2002-2007, SPLOST raised a total \$456.2 million, or \$91.2 million per year in DeKalb. During these five years, 13 new schools were built, 14 schools were completely renovated, and five schools received additions to accommodate growth and expand programming for career and technology and fine arts. Dozens of

schools also received systemic renovations, such as new roofs, lighting, HVAC, and electrical systems.

### **WHAT CAN CITY, STATE, AND FEDERAL OFFICIALS DO?**

Municipalities, states, school districts, and laws vary with respect to what is financially and politically possible when it comes to capital expenditures and educational reform. The ACLU's report asks the key question: What might City Schools achieve if all of Baltimore schools looked like Digital Harbor High or Abbottston Elementary schools?

The evidence to date suggests significant benefits to students, teachers, the community, and the entire city from a physically modernized school system and possibly from a comprehensive, time-compressed approach to achieving it. Some school districts in the U.S. appear to have adopted this approach and have used innovative financing to get the job done.

The first step for Baltimore is for city, state, and federal officials and legislators to make quality educational facilities a top priority and engage the public in this campaign. The condition of school buildings must be of utmost concern to ensure a high quality education for students and for the well-being of the city as a whole. The recommendations, outlined below, are intended to provide both governmental leaders and the greater Baltimore community with a path toward feasibly financing the modernization of all of Baltimore's public school buildings.

### **Recommendation: The State of Maryland and Baltimore City must collaborate with City Schools to devise a plan in 2010 to fund the \$2.8 billion Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan.**

Maryland and Baltimore City are guided by constitutional and charter decrees that underscore the rights of children. The state guarantees a "thorough and efficient" education for public school students, and the city is responsi-

ble for the well-being of its citizens. Thus, a city and state government collaboration to upgrade or build new school buildings in Baltimore City makes sense in terms of making such an undertaking a priority. Each entity contributes a certain amount of funding to improve school buildings, but there needs to be shared goal-setting and decision-making to renovate all schools, in a short-term manner.

There is much to learn from school districts that have found creative, progressive ways of financing their new and rehabilitated school buildings, in a relatively short timeline. The city and state should consider the three examples given, and others, in developing a plan:

- Create a successful partnership between the local district and state, as demonstrated by the City of New Haven and Connecticut. Due to Baltimore City's low wealth, the state will have to play a large role in financing the improvement of City Schools' facilities.
- Baltimore City and the state can explore innovative financing structures and public-private partnership options to increase borrowing capacity, as Greenville did to build or renovate 86 schools within five years.
- As a partner in the financing plan, Baltimore City will have to expand revenue to increase its commitment to improving City Schools' infrastructure. Using Georgia as an example, Baltimore City could seek state authorization to increase its sales tax by 1 percent or pursue other revenue options.
- While these options should be explored, the starting point in each of these examples was a determination to take up the challenge of renovating or building large numbers of schools quickly. Designing a plan and developing innovative financing structures and supporting revenue followed that determination to take up the challenge.

**Recommendation: The state should commit to bringing all school buildings in Maryland up to at least minimal adequacy in the short term, and implement a rational allocation for capital funds that directs funding to the greatest needs. Distribution of state funds should factor the total facility needs and each district's ability to contribute.**

The State Public School Construction Program (PSCP) can "equalize" educational facilities statewide, in accordance with its mission. Without addressing this issue, persistent disparities between wealthier and less wealthy school systems will continue. Maryland can play a much larger role in funding the improvement of City Schools' facilities and in the distribution of capital funding based on facility needs and the relative wealth and capacity of a district. The shared goal should be to ensure that all students in the state learn in the kind of physical facilities necessary for them to obtain an adequate education. The state must also complete a follow-up facilities assessment survey so that legislators and officials can ensure that funds are directed to the greatest needs.

**Recommendation: Baltimore City can increase its capital funding for school facility improvements and examine various options to expand revenue to support additional borrowing.**

Baltimore City can maintain a strong bond rating while increasing borrowing for improving school infrastructure. Increasing the debt limit to 3 percent to 4 percent of the assessed property tax base could generate \$155-\$394 million for improving school facilities. Increasing the city's debt ceiling to 4 percent could modernize up to eight high schools, approximately one-third of all high schools in the city. This increased borrowing will require additional revenue to pay off the debt. Baltimore City should look at various ways to increase revenue in order to be able to afford increased borrowing for school construction. With

a majority of city students struggling to learn in deficient school buildings, the city should commit to using future slots revenue to pay down additional borrowing for school facilities.

Ultimately, keeping and attracting new families in the city will require the reformation of schools, including the improvement of school buildings. Devoting the projected \$19 million a year in slots revenue to pay off bonds for school rehabilitation would be an important first step in modernizing school buildings in the city.

**Recommendation: Baltimore City, state, and federal leaders must advocate for a federal program to help low-wealth districts improve their school facilities.**

Nationally, urban school districts and other low-wealth jurisdictions are burdened with deteriorating school buildings. City and state leaders must see the federal government as a potential funder of the rehabilitation of Baltimore City school buildings, and urge citizens to advocate collectively to bring these needed resources to the city. Baltimore City and state leaders must advocate for federal funding for school facilities, and Maryland's delegation should play a lead role in moving this issue to the forefront in Congress.

**The June 2010  
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"Buildings for Academic  
Excellence," is available in  
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## ABELL SALUTES: **The Learn to Earn Program: In 10 years, 2,500 jobs, \$47,500,000 at work – supporting families, stabilizing neighborhoods.**

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Dr. Laura Spada has a vision.

The Director of the St. Ambrose Outreach Center at 3445 Park Heights Ave. oversees a program within the Center called “Learn to Earn,” which trains the unemployed and often unemployable, and usually unskilled, for job placement, and the opportunity to support their families and start new careers. To date and in each of six years previous, the program has trained and found jobs for an average of 250 trainees per year. In Ms. Spada’s vision, taking an arbitrary time frame of ten years, the program will have trained and found jobs for 2,500 clients. If each job averages \$19,000 year, over the 10 years, Learn to Earn will have generated \$47,500,000 in salaries in support of building families and stable neighborhoods.

That’s the vision. And it is coming into focus.

*Tamyra is 32 years old and lives in Govans with her 16-year-old son. She is now waiting to be placed in a promising position with the sizable food service program at the University of Maryland Medical Center on Green Street—at a level of skills and responsibility she has worked hard to achieve. Tamyra has come a long way.*

*She graduated Northern High School; attended Sojourner-Douglass College; dropped out; and was working in a law firm assisting in clerical work—as receptionist, filing and typing, when she was laid off. She found herself down and out: a single mother suddenly without income, raising a teen-age son, and to her dismay, unable to find another job that worked for her. That is when she made up her mind to change her life, somehow – she wasn’t certain how. Through friends, she contacted the Maryland Workforce Development program; the agency put her in touch with the Learn to Earn at 3445 Park Heights Ave.*

*After going through the orientation and testing and getting to understand that she was qualified to move onward*

*and upward, she was drawn to enroll into training for the food service program. She thinks back, reflectively, on that moment in her life: “I decided to take a leap of faith.”*

*The leap was a high one, though the landing would prove to be safe, satisfying, and life-changing. She attended classes over an eight week period in the Learn to Earn program at St. Ambrose Center and is now entering a field she loves (“I always loved cooking!”) and which offers her, with her qualifications earned in Learn to Earn, all of the opportunities in the higher levels of the field. “Someday,” she says, “I might even own and operate my own catering business.”*

*“I took the leap of faith, yes, but Learn to Earn was my jumping off point.”*

\* \* \*

By 8:00 in the morning a small crowd of about 10 persons has already congregated at the door of the Center on Park Heights — all African American, mostly male, between 16 and 20; records will show that 60 percent have a high school diploma or a GED, more than half live in the Park Heights area, and over half have been referred by the City’s Department of Social Services, the Mayor’s Office of Employment Development, and various substance abuse programs. When the doors open at 9:00 the group floods in and fill all of the chairs in the lobby, with some standing, all waiting to be interviewed.

Although at graduation time some months later, participants will go separate ways, taking jobs in child care, culinary arts, and as nursing assistants, they start out together by going through the step-by-step Learn to Earn orientation process. They begin getting to know the program, the instructors, the students and the curricula, and what each student can expect, and what is expected of each student.

Following orientation, there is individual testing to assess each student’s

educational background and qualifications. Staff uses the testing results to determine what additional literary skills or a GED may be required for the student to move ahead with the program.

Job placement follows and there is follow-up contact on a monthly basis for twelve months.

The cost of training each student is approximately \$1,860.

*Yolanda Holland is 30 years old, single with two children, 12 and 5. She has a good job and lives a life she aspired to, in the suburban community of Catonsville—a life situation she credits to her experience with the Learn to Earn program. But the path leading from where she was to where she is was not promising.*

*She was graduated from Carver Vocational high school and then worked in a variety of dead-end jobs in fast-food restaurant—chiefly McDonalds. “but in sharing, talking things over with a friend, I got to hear about Learn to Earn.”*

*She visited St. Ambrose Center at 3445 Park Heights Avenue and was encouraged to take the appropriate tests to help determine a recommended program within the Learn to Earn offerings. She found herself as a trainee in the four-week program leading to State Certification as a Geriatric Nursing Assistant. “The hours were long, eight hours a day for maybe four weeks or so, and sometimes starting as early as 7:30 in the morning. But the instructors were very helpful, very kind. I am now,” she says with undisguised pride, “a Certified Geriatric Nursing Assistant.*

*“My experience at Learn to Earn changed my life.”*

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Abell Salutes Dr. Laura Spada, for setting the ten-year goal of finding 250 jobs a year for its trainees over ten years, and putting \$47,500,000 at work in support of creating families and stabilizing neighborhoods—and for keeping the goal in her line of vision.

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