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House passes city school construction bill

Measure goes to Senate

By [Michael Dresser](#) and Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun
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The House of Delegates overwhelmingly approved a \$1.1 billion plan Friday to rebuild Baltimore's deteriorated school buildings, sending the bill to the Senate.

The vote was 107 to 30, with about a dozen Republicans joining all Democrats in supporting the bill.

The legislation is a modified version of a plan conceived by city schools chief Andres Alonso and supported by Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. In its current form, the bill would allot \$20 million a year in state lottery funds to match like amounts from both Baltimore and the city school system.

The money would allow the Maryland Stadium Authority to issue bonds to build an estimated 15 new schools and renovate about 35 others.

"This bill is very important, and we're in it together," said Del. Andrew Serafini, a Western Maryland Republican who supported the bill. "This is a big deal." Supporters of the measure said overhauling the city's aging schools would help Baltimore attract more residents and enhance its neighborhoods — and that success would reverbrate throughout the state.

"As the city goes, so goes us," said Del. John A. Olszewski Jr., a Baltimore County Democrat.

Del. Norman H. Conway, an Eastern Shore Democrat and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said the investment in the city could "pay dividends for years to come."

Opponents, though, questioned the wisdom of pouring so much money into upgrading schools when the city and its school system suffer from so many other problems. Some suburban and rural legislators complained that Baltimore would be getting special treatment outside of the state system for funding school construction.

"You can put a kid in a brand new school, but it won't make him a better student," said Del. Michael McDermott, an Eastern Shore Republican.

Del. Anthony J. O'Donnell, the House GOP leader from St. Mary's County, said Baltimore deserves the legislature's help. But he argued that paying off the debt for the schools makeover would burden city and state taxpayers to the tune of nearly \$60 million for years to come.

O'Donnell also said it looked to some like the construction funding measure was a reward of sorts from legislative leaders to city lawmakers for their support earlier in the afternoon of a controversial plan to raise taxes on gasoline to fund new roads and transit.

But Del. Curt Anderson, a Baltimore city Democrat, said the timing of the two votes was just a coincidence. "Nobody's arms were twisted," he said.

"We understand that our schools need to be better," Anderson said. But he said city lawmakers have been working for several years now to "come up with a plan to make sure our schools are good 10, 20, 30 and 50 years from now."

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake issued a statement after the House vote saying the city was a step closer to beginning a decade-long effort to rebuild its schools. She said the city's \$20 million share of the funding would come from its bottle tax, casino revenues and other sources.

"Families have a fundamental right to access a good education in quality school buildings," Rawlings-Blake said. "And providing more opportunities for families to send their children to good public schools will help get Baltimore growing again."

The funding bill now goes to the Senate, where Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller said he was confident it would pass.

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