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City schools construction bill clears Senate House had already approved \$1 billion plan for Baltimore

By [Michael Dresser](#), The Baltimore Sun
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In a long-sought victory for Baltimore, the Maryland Senate approved a \$1 billion financing plan Friday for an unprecedented systemwide drive to rebuild and renovate the city's crumbling school buildings.

The measure passed easily on a bipartisan vote of 40-7. It now goes back to the House of Delegates for approval of a minor amendment and then will move to Gov. Martin O'Malley's desk.

Takirra Winfield, a spokeswoman for O'Malley, said the governor will sign the bill. "He's always been a supporter of Baltimore City and Baltimore City public schools, and he is very pleased that a deal has been reached," she said.

The bill is to fund the first six-year phase of what advocates hope will be an eventual \$2.4 billion renewal plan for the system with the state's oldest school buildings, some of which date to the 19th century.

It provides \$20 million a year in state lottery money over the next three decades — to be matched by like sums from the city government and the school system — to float the bonds that will be used to pay for the first \$1 billion of work. The money is expected to pay for about 15 new schools and extensive renovation of about 35 others.

The plan, developed by a coalition of education activists working with city schools chief Andrés Alonso, stalled last year amid questions about the financing mechanism and whether City Hall was fully on board.

This year, the proposal — backed by Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and a top priority of the Baltimore Senate and House delegations — won early backing from House Speaker Michael E. Busch and, later, from Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.

Busch, an Anne Arundel Democrat, said Friday that the schools measure and a transportation funding bill that cleared the General Assembly Friday were the "two most substantive" bills to pass this year.

"This investment in the schools in Baltimore City I believe will pay a huge dividend in the future, not just to the citizens of Baltimore but to the entire state," he said. Bebe Verdery of the Maryland ACLU, a spokeswoman for the Baltimore Education Coalition, said the program is vital to Baltimore's future.

"Fifty new or fully renovated schools will keep people in the city, will help the schools support the teachers and the children better, will create thousands of jobs," she said. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake issued a statement thanking Busch, O'Malley and Miller.

"Their commitment shows a deep concern for the well being of Baltimore City students," the mayor said. "Together, we will ensure that every city student will sit in a clean, modern and safe building."

Those students, along with their parents and teachers, played a role in persuading legislators to back the plan. At hearings and rallies, they described conditions in the city's schools: filthy bathrooms, broken windows, obsolete computer labs and ineffective heating and air conditioning.

Alonso said the journey to passage had been "unbelievably hard," and "has extended all of us in ways we couldn't understand at the start, with so many hard choices." He applauded legislators and state leaders, who he said "came through," for city students. The bill passed the Senate with little discussion and no contention. After the vote, Baltimore senators thanked their colleagues for their strong support. "I'm in awe today," said Sen. Verna Jones Rodwell, a Baltimore Democrat. The House passed the bill last week.

Miller, who was openly skeptical about the original plan, praised Rachel H. Hise, a policy analyst in the Department of Legislative Services, as the unsung hero in a weeks-long effort to revise the funding formula in a way that won his support and the votes of an overwhelming majority in both houses.

The measure passed with yes votes from all 35 Senate Democrats, joined by five Republicans. Voting no were Republican Sens. J.B. Jennings (Baltimore-Harford counties), Barry Glassman (Harford), Nancy Jacobs (Harford-Cecil), E.J. Pipkin (Upper Shore), Edward R. Reilly (Anne Arundel), Christopher B. Shank (Washington) and Bryan W. Simonaire (Anne Arundel).

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