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Baltimore Schools Lose In Court -- Ruling Favored Charter Schools

By Patricia Hawke

In 2005, City Neighbors and Patterson Park Public, two charter schools in Baltimore, appealed the

Baltimore schools' per student funding formula to the state board. The board ruled in their favor, and the Baltimore schools appealed the board's decision in the Court of Special Appeals, Maryland's second highest court. Early this month, the court ruled in favor of the charter schools, requiring Maryland school systems to spend as much money per student at charter schools as they spend at their traditional schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded, but they operate independently under contracts with local school boards. Of the 24 charter schools in the state of Maryland, 17 are located in the Baltimore schools system.

The Baltimore schools' per student funding formula differs between their traditional schools and charter schools. Traditional schools receive the equivalent of approximately \$11,000 per student. Charter schools receive \$5,859 per student in cash, with the remainder received in services provided to the schools by the Baltimore schools system, such as special education and food. City Neighbors and Patterson Park Public contend that this formula limits their ability to choose how to provide services to their students, and the court agreed.

After the court handed down its ruling, the Baltimore schools board met in executive session, issuing a vaguely worded statement. It reiterated that the Baltimore schools remain a strong supporter of charters schools, but believe the recent court ruling will hurt the traditional schools by imposing a financial hardship on the vast majority of them. The statement further noted that the ruling could result in traditional schools receiving less per student funding than the charter schools. Additionally, the statement said that the board is fully committed to complying with the law, but it leaves open the possibility of an appeal by stating that the Baltimore schools board "feels obligated to fully consider its legal options."

After the statement was released, City Neighbors board President Bobbi Macdonald stated that they were not asking for more money, only equity within the Baltimore schools system. City Neighbors attorney Will DuBois underscored the fact that both the state board and the court agreed on a funding

model that achieves the parity sought by the two charter schools.

The charter schools hope to meet with the Baltimore schools to discuss the court's ruling. They would like to move forward with the Baltimore schools board toward the interest of all Baltimore schools students. Meanwhile, the Baltimore schools board Chairman Brian D. Morris stated that the Baltimore schools currently is analyzing the financial impact of the court's ruling.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. For more information on Baltimore schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Maryland/Baltimore/index.html>

CEO Bonnie Copeland Leaving Baltimore Schools Cause For Concern

By Patricia Hawke

CEO Bonnie Copeland left the Baltimore schools on July 1, 2006. She had been with them for three years, which is a norm for an urban school superintendent. Her leaving, however, was not of her own choosing.

The Baltimore schools board felt she had a low–key management style and did was not a strong enough leader to make the changes needed to reform the Baltimore schools. Their reasoning appears to have been a bit flawed.

During her tenure with the Baltimore schools, Copeland managed a financial and management turnaround that was recognized by major rating agencies and school systems nationwide, and eliminated 1,100 positions — even though her predecessor, Carmen Russo had left the school system in a mess. Test scores were on the rise, and she received high marks for her significant progress in the Baltimore schools from the GBC, a regional top business advocacy group. This came in 2003, after the group's financial review of the Baltimore schools.

Copeland was not without her enemies, however. The Greater Baltimore Committee, entrenched in bureaucracy and complacency, was not a supporter of Copeland, and they still rule the Baltimore schools. Additionally, politicians, who wished to damage Mayor Martin O'Malley, saw the troubled Baltimore schools as the perfect instrument. A political battle between the mayor, Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan, and Governor Robert Ehrlick ensued, with Copeland unfairly caught in the middle.

The Baltimore schools board became involved with Copeland and her staff's day–to–day operations, making her job impossible to execute. This type of interference will hinder the next CEO as well, unless the Baltimore schools board comes to its senses.

Copeland took over under terrible circumstances that would have crippled a lesser CEO, yet she did much to improve the Baltimore schools. She was the fifth CEO since 1997. The Baltimore schools track record with their CEOs is not a good one.

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The community is frustrated over Copeland's leaving. She did much to connect business people and companies with the Baltimore schools, and they fear these connections will be reversed. Parents are concerned for their children's future educational prospects.

Loss of a serious reformer for the Baltimore schools makes it difficult for the community to be optimistic for the future. The middle schools and the special education program are still in trouble, too many children are dropping out or unprepared to enter the workplace or college, and progress is sure to slow down now that Copeland has left. It appears that reform will remain elusive until the board and opponents give a good CEO the opportunity to do his or her job.

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Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K-12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K-12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school

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