

County Council Budget Work Session

Superintendent Barnes' Prepared Remarks

May 5, 2025



Good morning. My name is Bill Barnes, and I am the Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System. Thank you, Chair Walsh, Vice Chair Jones, and each esteemed member of this Council for inviting me and my team here today to discuss the funding needs of our school system.

Last week, Chair Walsh provided feedback to Brian Hull, our Chief Financial Officer, on information that would be helpful to present to begin our work session, so I want to be sure I touch on each of those items to help inform the conversations we will be having today. Some of this information was provided to the Council on Friday.

At last week's public hearing hosted by the County Council, you heard testimony from students, parents, educators, and administrative staff about the importance of adequate funding for the school system and difficult decisions that will have to be made without that funding.

Just over two months ago, the Board of Education adopted its operating budget request for the 2026 fiscal year. The Board effectively detailed the needs of the school system to ensure our educators are compensated fairly and sufficiently; we can fulfill our obligations, commitments, and mandates; and essential services such as special education and safety and security are prioritized. At the time, the Board's Above Maintenance of Effort funding request was \$107.3 million dollars to support funding needs of \$111.9 million dollars. Since that time, the legislature has adjourned, and cost estimates have been updated decreasing cost growth to \$101.6 million dollars.

On April 21st, County Executive Calvin Ball released his Proposed Fiscal Year 2026 Operating Budget, which allocated \$39.3 million dollars in recurring funds above Maintenance of Effort funding to the school system, and \$1.5 million dollars in funding that can be used for one-time expenditures. Dr. Ball and his team have been willing and collaborative partners through this process, and while I greatly appreciate the efforts to provide a level of funding well above Maintenance of Effort, it simply isn't enough to avoid very difficult decisions that will alter the landscape of education in Howard County.

I think it's important to understand the realities of the current state of education expectations and funding because this shapes how far a dollar goes in today's learning systems.

In fiscal year 2010, the per pupil funding in Howard County was just above \$13,000 dollars. Today, it is closer to \$20,000 dollars. But when adjusted for inflation, our spending level per student is virtually unchanged from fifteen years ago. However, schools and school systems are now expected to provide many more services than we were just fifteen years ago. Additionally, the Blueprint has designed funding

formulas based on wealth equalization factors where Howard County is intentionally expected to invest at a local level in education at higher rates than other counties.

Let's now briefly take a look at available new revenue versus funding needs of the school system.

As you see in the graphic, the total new revenue we have available is just over \$47.3 million dollars. We consider our funding needs in five primary groupings, that I will briefly describe.

- Existing Service Commitments that we currently provide include Blueprint requirements; transportation contracts and reduced walk zones; special education contractual obligations, staffing, and non-public costs; retirement costs; utilities; FY 2025 reclassifications; Guilford Park High School staffing; summer programming; and several other commitments.
- One-Time Funding Items include security enhancements, ice machines in high schools, vehicle replacements, and water filtration.
- Employee Compensation and Benefits Requirements include the costs to maintain and recruit staff, including negotiated agreements, health insurance, National Board Certification pay and benefits, and other negotiated contract commitments.
- Other Priorities includes special education service levels; security positions; math and reading teachers and specialists; planning time for instructional team leaders; middle school assistant principals; technology service fund chargebacks; athletic trainers; Innovative Pathways; and Human Resources positions.

The total difference between new revenue and funding needs to support the Board of Education's requested budget is \$54.3 million dollars. And the total difference between the new revenue and the existing service commitments, including employee compensation and benefits, is \$29.2 million dollars alone.

So, how do we stretch \$47.3 million dollars of new revenue to cover \$101.6 million dollars-worth of needs? The short answer is, we can't. We are going to have to make difficult decisions related to the reduction and elimination of the Board's requested priorities, as well as existing programs, services, and positions we value a little bit less than our current requirements and commitments.

But even prioritizing just our existing service commitments and the compensation and benefits requirements would require a restoration of nearly \$30 million dollars more in new revenue than we are currently projected to receive.

The reality is that the time is now to collectively decide the path forward related to the school system's funding.

One possible path fulfills the intent of the Blueprint, namely ensuring that the students with the greatest support and service needs are prioritized. This path results in the elimination of many programs and services that are valued by students, families, and each of us, but are not prioritized by funding formulas.

The second path would require a significant investment of new revenue, specifically \$29.2 million, from the County to fulfill the requirements and commitments we have, while maintaining many of those programs and services that are not mandated but are still valued. As I mentioned before, the Blueprint legislation is intentionally designed to place the decision of maintaining non-prioritized, but valued, programs, with the local funding authority.

As other Boards of Education in Maryland make their budget decisions, we are seeing the possibilities of class sizes rising to 40-plus, the reduction of several school-based positions, a reduction to student opportunities, and a reduction to compensation increases for staff.

As we contemplate those options, I want to elevate the fact that this year's gap between new revenue and funding needs is nearly identical to a year ago when we made decisions that had monumental and adverse impacts on our organization.

A year ago, we made \$31.1 million dollars in cuts to existing services, which totaled a 2.8% cut to our base budget and the elimination of more than 192 positions. School-based reductions included a class size increase of one across the secondary grade levels, and reductions to student services supports, special education, and summer programs among others. But nearly 60% of the reductions a year ago were to non-school-based programs, services and staffing and included eliminating more than 81 positions across all divisions, resulting in our district having the smallest administrative support staff by percentage among like school districts in Maryland. The more desirable approach is to always protect school-based programs, services and positions, but the decisions we made a year ago have had significant impact to the areas that ensure our organization functions and provide essential support to schools. While further reductions in this area may be necessary, the consequences will have a significant impact on the support schools receive centrally.

So, if the path we choose together results in no restoration of revenue and we must make \$29.2 million dollars in cuts to existing programs, services and positions in our base budget, you can see on this list the types of items that will have to be considered. As you see, considerations could impact class sizes, school-based positions, elementary music, and further reductions to programs, services and positions that are non-school-based. And even with all of the detrimental cuts on this list, including more than 220 positions, we would still be required to identify another \$10 million dollars in cuts to our base budget.

As we begin our conversation today, I want to express my appreciation for the support and collaboration that has been extended to me by each member of this Council during my tenure as Superintendent. We collectively have difficult decisions ahead of us and I am grateful that we are taking on these challenges in a spirit of collaboration and support. And I want to thank Dr. Ball and his team for their continued collaboration and support.

I have several members of my leadership team with me today and we are prepared to answer any questions and engage in dialog with members of the Council.

Thank you.