

MontCo school board asks state lawmakers to make counties pay up

By: [Lisa Gartner](#) 06/09/11 8:05 PM

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The Montgomery County school board is asking state lawmakers to rewrite Maryland's school funding law to force the county government to spend more per pupil on the school system each year -- even if it means raising property taxes at unprecedented rates.

"Work with your Annapolis colleagues to ensure that local education dollars supplement rather than supplant state education funding as required," school board President Christopher Barclay wrote in a letter to Del. Brian Feldman, Sen. Jamie Raskin and other members of the Montgomery County delegation.

The state "maintenance of effort" rule requires counties to not reduce their per-pupil spending on public schools each year, inflicting millions of dollars in penalties when local governments fall short without a waiver from the state.

The measure was intended to protect public education, but the recession has made the provision impossible to meet, say Montgomery County officials, who cut local funding for Montgomery County Public Schools' budget \$45 million for the upcoming school year.

The school board asked its state counterpart to force the County Council's hand, but the Maryland school board said there was nothing it could do.

In the letter, Barclay asks Feldman and Raskin to ensure that this new, lower funding level doesn't become the new baseline; to inflict the \$26 million penalty that waiverless Montgomery County is facing on the local government instead of the school system; and to authorize county councils to raise taxes above charter limits for education purposes.

Overall, the school board wants "maintenance of effort" to be a hard-and-fast law.

Raskin, D-Takoma Park, and chairman of the Montgomery County delegation, told *The Washington Examiner* that "the law is a moving target in an unfolding project, but we don't want to do anything that doesn't bring people together in Montgomery County."

Which would be difficult, given the reactions of county officials to Barclay's proposal.

"That's nuts. We're broke if they do that. They'd wreck the county," said Councilman Marc Elrich, D-at large. He called the letter "a Jerry Weast move," referring to Montgomery's superintendent, who has guarded the schools' budget during his 12-year reign and is retiring this month.

Phil Andrews, D-Rockville/Gaithersburg, who sits on the council's education committee, said it's not fair to short other county-funded systems that serve children, like public libraries and social services. "I think you'd create a situation where one entity, the school system, gets special treatment, and I don't think we should have that exception," Andrews said.

This year, funding for the public schools made up 57 percent of the county budget.

County Executive Ike Leggett told *The Examiner* he will "certainly take a look" at the proposal, but as one of the authors of the county's limit on property taxes, "I certainly do not support exempting schools' spending from the charter limits."