

Beat: Politics

Prince Georges County School System power struggle leaves students forgotten

Baker and School Board fight for Power

ANNAPOLIS, MD, 02.04.2013, 14:10 Time

USPA NEWS - While test scores in the states second largest school district remain among the lowest in the region, Prince George's County Executive Rushern Baker and the county's elected School Board remain in a bitter power struggle over control of the school system, its budget, and the next Superintendent.

State Senators and Members of the House of Delegates from Prince George's County held a joint public hearing last night to get input from all interested parties, including parents and teachers, on two bills introduced last week in the state legislature.

SB1071 was introduced by the Senators representing Prince George's County at the request of County Executive Rushern L. Baker, III. This proposal is by far the most controversial, and would turn over control of the school system's \$1.7 billion budget as well as the hiring and management of the schools superintendent to the County Executive.

HB1107 takes a more guarded approach and creates a task force to evaluate "Best Practices" for School Board operation in Prince George's County. Under the House bill, the management of the school systems superintendent would remain with the elected School Board as well as management of the \$1.7 billion budget. The school board would go to more of a hybrid model where the current 10 elected positions remain in place, but 4 new positions would be added. The 4 new seats on the board would be appointed in some proportion between the County Executive and the County Council, and is rumored to guarantee a seat to the PTA President.

Supporters of SB1071 and County Executive Bakers takeover plan

Linda Thornton Thomas, a former School Board Member from District 4 told legislators that she generally supports the County Executive's proposal, and is humbled by his "commitment to our kids."

In written testimony she stated "We must devise strategies improving education for all students. Without exception! Without Excuse!" She also told legislators that her children both attended Prince George's County Public Schools and are doing quite well. She went on to stress the need for more fiscal responsibility in the school system, citing an example of \$20 Million contract for roofs at 21 schools being awarded to a single contractor with no bid process. She feels County Executive Baker is best able to accomplish this.

Paul Thompson, co-chair of Progressive Cheverly testified at the hearing in support of SB1071 and County Executive Baker's takeover proposal stating that "the lack of sustained and significant progress in student achievement and the revolving door at the top is not living up to our legitimate expectations. At a time of great progress , and even greater promise in our County with regard to public safety, economic development, and the transparency and responsiveness of government, the County schools continue to lag."

Opponents of SB1071 and County Executive Bakers takeover plan

Bob Ross, Chairman of the Prince George's County NAACP opposes the legislation citing the bill was introduced too late in the General Assembly's 90 day session and has not been properly vetted.

Ross also told Senators and Delegates that "we spend more on putting youth in prison than we do on education. What we pay to incarcerate people on minor drug and alcohol charges, could be a teachers salary."

Theresa Mitchell Dudley, a teacher at Benjamin Tasker Middle School asked the Prince George's County legislators to consider two questions when considering the proposed legislation. Her questions were "What about our Children", and "Where are they in these bills." She asserted that "this is about money and power, not about our children."

Ms. Dudley, also stated that the school system needs more parental support. "Make them as accountable as I am," she said. Speaking

of school funding, "give the school board the same autonomy to tax as given to Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC)." I would one day like to have as beautiful and well utilized schools as we have parks, she concluded.

Will there be resolution for Prince Georges Countys school children?

Some say transferring power to County Executive Baker doesn't address the root problems that are causing Prince George's County to lag behind on student achievement.

Others say the current system is not working, and they're willing to give Baker's plan a try.

A number of lawmakers seem willing to give the County Executive power over the superintendent, but not the school system's \$1.7 billion budget.

Further details are expected late Tuesday on a "compromise" bill drafted with input from members of both the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates from Prince George's County.

Any compromise bill will need to pass both Chambers by Monday, April 8, at 12:00 midnight when the Maryland General Assembly adjourns Sine Die.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-745/prince-georges-county-school-system-power-struggle-leaves-students-forgotten.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDSStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): M. SCOTT BOWLING

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619