

# Baltimore County's dysfunctional school board can't be fixed from State House

Editorial  
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In less than two weeks, the House Ways and Means Committee is scheduled to take up emergency legislation to alter how the Baltimore County Board of Education elects its chair and vice-chair. Instead of a minimum of seven votes, as is required now, the positions could be elected by a board majority. It's a subtle difference, but a critical one.

Last December, the chair elected a year earlier, Kathleen Causey, retained her position even though the vote was 6-5 in favor of someone else. But without that crucial seventh vote — which last belonged to Roger Hayden, the former county executive who served on the board and died in October — the incumbent chair and vice-chair, Julie Henn, stayed in power, and the majority lost.

The pending legislation, House Bill 1633 offered by Del. Eric Ebersole and several others, would allow the majority, even if less than seven, to prevail in such votes and most likely result in the election of Cheryl E. Pasteur, a retired English teacher, as chair. But it wouldn't really "fix" the problem.

The board still requires seven votes to approve much of its agenda, and Ms. Pasteur may come up short, particularly if Mr. Hayden's replacement fails to support her (a nominating commission has been reviewing candidates and is expected to send two names to Gov. Larry Hogan later this month).

The real problem isn't the rules, it's the polarization on the board. Chair Causey and Vice-Chair Henn have failed to form a functioning majority coalition.

In years past, and when school boards were more collaborative and differences in school policy more easily bridged, this would be fairly routine. Not anymore. There are a number of reasons for this. One is the legacy of Dallas Dance, the former schools superintendent who went to jail for failing to disclose income from outside consulting work, which feeds that antagonism. Another is the general hostility of the Causey-Henn coalition toward school administrators. Before the two came to power, they were instrumental in urging the state school superintendent to take the highly unusual move of overturning the previous board's pick of longtime Baltimore County educator Verletta White as Mr. Dance's successor.

But the divide really runs much deeper than that and touches on the sensitive issues of both race and partisan politics. Under Mr. Dance, the school system,

with the support of earlier board leadership, was moving forward aggressively on issues of equity in this majority-minority district, where less than 36% of the system's 115,038 students identify as white compared to 39.5% who identify as black. This was symbolized by Mr. Dance's controversial support for putting laptop computers in the hands of every student. The current board leadership has shown far less interest in that cause, however, scaling back technology spending and focusing on such matters as more readily expelling unruly students and starting classes after Labor Day, the former suggesting a lack of tolerance for low-income minority youth and the latter the fulfillment of a very public priority of Governor Hogan.

Under Causey-Henn, support for the Hogan administration is probably not an accident. The governor himself has shown past interest in Baltimore County politics, in general, and the school board, in particular. And both Ms. Causey and Ms. Henn are registered Republicans like the governor. And while the school board is considered a non-partisan post (even for those seven positions elected by voters in the hybrid board), the partisan edge often shines through — most recently in online protests over Delegate Ebersole's bill, which has been characterized by at least one board member as an effort by Democrats in Annapolis to "change the rules" in order to "alter the results." Having a state superintendent overturn a previous board's decision on leadership was somehow not seen as a similar outside intervention to reverse results.

The solution? Not a change of the rules by the Maryland General Assembly. Under the circumstances, requiring seven votes might be the best protection Baltimore County residents have against the increasingly politicized and dysfunctional board governing Maryland's third largest school district. What's really needed is for the current members, perhaps when the 12th is added, to be locked in a room and not emerge until a working coalition is formed. This is Democracy 101. It involves give and take. That's a lesson these "adults" should have learned long before now.