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Committee: Environment and Transportation
Testimony on: HB636 – “School Buildings - Drinking Water Outlets - Elevated Level of Lead (Safe School Drinking Water Act)”
Position: Support
Hearing Date: February 10, 2021

The Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report on HB636. The bill would aid the efforts of local school systems in Maryland to address the pernicious presence of lead in school drinking water by specifying that “an elevated level of lead” is one that exceeds five parts per billion. Lead exposure poses a substantial threat to the health of Maryland’s children, especially low-income children.

This legislation complements and furthers the intent of legislation enacted in 2019 by the General Assembly (Chapter 557) to reduce the presence of lead in school drinking water. In that legislation, the General Assembly declared that “any exposure to lead in drinking water is dangerous to the health and development of children,” and that “[i]t is the intent of the General Assembly that schools work proactively to reduce the concentration of lead in drinking water outlets below 5 parts per billion.” (MD Environment Article, Section 6-1501.1.) The five parts-per-billion standard is in accord with the standard used by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that public health actions should be initiated for children with a lead level in their blood of 5 µg/dl.

Lead is a neurotoxin that adversely affects humans and virtually every other form of life. Lead exposure in young children can result in lowered intelligence, reading and learning disabilities, impaired hearing, reduced attention span, hyperactivity, delayed puberty, reduced postnatal growth, and reduced earning potential. It also is associated with reduced impulse control; there have been associations between childhood lead exposure and proclivity to violence and crime in adulthood. Furthermore, lead exposure is often insidious – while acute poisoning can result in dramatic health failures, the more common chronic exposures have no distinct symptoms and are therefore sometimes overlooked or misinterpreted, leading to possibly permanent brain damage.

Since the General Assembly has told schools that they should “work proactively to reduce the concentration of lead in drinking water outlets below 5 parts per billion,” it is fully appropriate to define “an elevated level of lead” in drinking water using this standard. The threat posed to the health of Maryland’s children by lead is grave, and there should not be any ambiguity as to the obligation of schools to act in accord with a clear 5 parts-per-billion standard.

For these reasons, the Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report on this bill.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.

