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Advocacy groups rally for more city school funding

More than 20 organizations plan protests to pressure O'Malley

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They've each worked for years to improve aspects of education in Baltimore. New Leaders for New Schools trains principals. The Child First Authority runs after-school programs. The Maryland Charter School Network represents independently run public schools.

Now, more than 20 advocacy groups have banded together - calling themselves the Baltimore Education Coalition - to protest possible state funding cuts to city schools. The money that schools will receive as part of the federal stimulus package signed this week by President Obama isn't good enough for them. They want Gov. Martin O'Malley to withdraw proposed changes in education-funding formulas that would disproportionately hurt Baltimore and Prince George's County. And they're angry that lawmakers from Baltimore aren't fighting harder against the proposals, which would go to the General Assembly for a vote.

"We are being told the usual politician statement: 'Baltimore, be quiet. We'll handle it,' " said Bishop Douglas I. Miles, co-chairman of the advocacy group Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development (BUILD). "It's not happening."

While the changes in funding formulas are still on the table, the coalition is planning a rally for March 3 in Annapolis and has pledged to bring out as many as 3,000 participants, mostly parents and children. In addition, it is sending representatives to lobby at the State House every Monday.

O'Malley says the \$1.1 billion that Maryland is due to receive for education from the stimulus during the next two years will offset any cuts. Baltimore alone will get at least \$70 million. But asked if he plans to withdraw his formula proposals, O'Malley said, "I can't answer that question intelligently." He quickly corrected himself, saying he meant "informatively."

"I try to be intelligent," he said.

While the stimulus provides a one-time infusion of money, any formula changes would become state law and continue into the future, unless the law were changed again. Baltimore schools chief Andrés Alonso has said the changes O'Malley proposed would leave his system with a shortfall every year, and he can't pay teachers and other employees with a funding stream that's going to dry up.

Amid the news that Maryland's general fund revenues in January were down by 8 percent from January 2008, O'Malley administration officials said they need to make sure the state can afford its commitments over time. The governor's staff is going through the fine print of the stimulus package to figure out how much flexibility states have. O'Malley said preserving education funding is his No. 2 priority, behind saving the jobs of 700 state workers facing the prospect of layoffs.

"I think the bottom line is, we need to make sure that whether the dollars are federal or whether the dollars are state dollars that we continue to fund what is the best public school system in America," the governor said Tuesday, referring to the recent Education Week rankings that placed Maryland's public schools ahead of all other states. He spoke to reporters after an appearance at Germantown Elementary in Annapolis, where children waved large foam "Maryland Public Schools #1" gloves and a banner across the gymnasium stage promoted the ranking.

Depending on its interpretation, language in the stimulus might require O'Malley to back down from the proposed formula changes. The new law says the money "must first be used to restore state aid to school districts" under the funding formulas used either this academic year or last, whichever is higher. But the federal Department of Education can grant a waiver from that requirement.

The \$1.1 billion for Maryland schools contains money earmarked for specific purposes, namely \$208 million for special education and \$179 million for extra programming in high-poverty schools. But the bulk of the money, \$721 million, is meant to prevent budget cuts in K through 12 and in higher education.

The Baltimore Education Coalition was formed a few weeks ago as BUILD reached out to other organizations. Its members include the local branches of the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP and the Baltimore Algebra Project, a tutoring and advocacy group. In 1994, the ACLU sued the state on the grounds that it was unlawfully underfunding Baltimore schools and depriving students of their constitutional right to an adequate education. The lawsuit, still under the jurisdiction of the Baltimore Circuit Court, led to the passage of the state's Thornton law, which sent \$1.3 billion in new money to Maryland schools between 2002 and 2008.

During its 2007 special session, the General Assembly removed until 2011 annual inflation increases that districts would have received under Thornton. That prompted \$50 million in budget cuts in Baltimore for the current school year and the prospect of the same or more next year.

O'Malley's proposals would save the state \$140 million next year. Though Maryland has 24 school districts, 25 percent of the savings would come from cutting Baltimore, and 31 percent would come from Prince George's, according to an ACLU analysis.

"It is nonsensical, and it doesn't speak to a sincerity on behalf of the governor," said Khalilah Harris, director of the foundation supporting Baltimore Freedom Academy, a charter school in the coalition.

Districts would pay more of the cost of schooling special-education students who need private placement. Some districts would be held accountable for increased teacher pension costs. A component of Thornton providing extra dollars where the cost of running schools is high would be eliminated, although that would be the easiest piece to restore for a single year with the stimulus money.

Advocates point to the recent progress in Baltimore schools, including improved test scores and an end to 40 years of enrollment decline. "This is a moment in time we have been working for, a time when putting money toward the public schools is truly an investment," said Bobbi Macdonald, co-chair of the Coalition of Baltimore Charter Schools. "If our elected officials are going to represent us, then they need to take a stand for fully funding our schools now."

State Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, chair of the Baltimore delegation, said he and other legislators have been involved in "very delicate, very private negotiations" over school funding with the governor and colleagues from the counties. "I can tell you, we've been working extremely hard," said McFadden, a longtime city schools employee.

Advocates in Prince George's County don't appear to be as vocal or organized as those in Baltimore.

Regardless of the outcome of the budget situation, the coalition members say they have taken a major step to improve Baltimore schools by joining together. While wealthier, suburban jurisdictions can typically rally quickly against a given problem, that has long been lacking in the city.

"It's a springboard for something Baltimore has been lagging behind on," Harris said.