

Possible fixes for Baltimore County high school overcrowding include new construction, 'aggressively' using space



Parents, teachers and other stakeholders listen to Arniban Basu, of the Sage Policy Group, at a public information forum concerning high school capacity on Monday, July 9. (Cody Boteler/BSMG)



By **Cody Boteler**
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Baltimore County Public Schools officials presented **seven proposals** at a public forum Monday on how the county could address overcrowding in its high schools.

The county expects a 1,700-seat shortfall in its high schools in the coming decade, meaning a handful of schools will be over their state-rated capacity. Catonsville, Perry Hall, Pikesville, Towson and Sparrows Point are among the high schools that are projected to be over capacity by 110 percent.

The proposals, presented at a forum attended by about 100 people in the cafeteria of Catonsville High School,

on Monday, range from spending hundreds of millions of dollars on capital projects to “aggressively” using existing seats in the system with boundary changes and magnet program reorganization. The proposals might go through several iterations before being presented to the Baltimore County Board of Education.

The possible plans to address overcrowding were formulated, in part, using feedback from a series of nine focus groups held in June around the county. BCPS is scheduled to hold additional information sessions Thursday, July 12, at George Washington Carver High School and Tuesday, July 17, at Dundalk High School, both from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Details on additional information sessions to be held in September have yet to be announced.

According to Sage Policy Group, the firm that has been contracted by BCPS for the capacity study, 90 percent of the focus group participants were willing to pay more in property taxes to fund “an optimal capacity solution.”

The majority of respondents — 55 percent — said they would accept a property tax increase of between 10 and 20 cents. Baltimore County’s current property tax rate is \$1.10 per \$100 of assessed value.

Anirban Basu, head of the SAGE Policy Group, said it was unlikely anyone in attendance would “adore” any of the seven proposals that were crafted after the focus groups.

He asked those in attendance to consider “which of these options you view as least offensive.” The options presented will not necessarily be the plans that are ultimately decided between by the Board of Education.

Basu presented each scenario to the audience quickly, fielding questions and allowing for some back-and-forth over the proposals at the start of the night.

Afterward, he and BCPS employees wandered around the cafeteria as parents and other stakeholders moved between displays detailing each proposal. Some facilitated conversations about specific scenarios while others took notes to gather feedback.

Venus Torbit, a BCPS parent who has a son entering the ninth grade, said she was “grateful” that the school system was holding focus groups and information forums like the one in Catonsville.

“I like the fact they’ve included us in this,” Torbit said. “I did have questions [about the scenarios], and they wrote them down. I think they’re taking us seriously.”

Solutions presented

Each scenario works with the same enrollment projections for 2027, which put eight high schools — Catonsville, Pikesville, Towson, Parkville, Perry Hall, Dundalk/Sollers Point, Patapsco and Sparrows Point — at above 110 percent capacity.

Under the same projections, if nothing is done, Woodlawn, Milford Mill Academy and Randallstown will be below 90 percent capacity, and every other high school in the county, including Lansdowne, Kenwood, Hereford and Dulaney, are projected to be between 90 and 110 percent capacity.

Each of the seven scenarios presents different actions the school system could take — including constructing new facilities, building additions, comprehensive boundary changes, magnet school program changes or a combination of actions — to ensure every public high school in the county is at or below capacity in 2027.

The cheapest scenario, at a projected cost of \$275 million, focuses on “fully using existing school capacity at schools with less enrollment than their school’s state-rated capacity” and minimizing the number of capital projects needed. Still, that scenario involves constructing replacement schools at Towson and Loch Raven, and building additions at Dundalk and Patapsco.

That scenario, which calls for “aggressively” using existing seats in the school system, would see an estimated 2,246 students relocated.

The second-costliest scenario, with an estimated cost of \$500 million and referred to as “Just Build It,” would see no students relocated, but with a replacement school at Towson and additions at Catonsville, Dundalk, Parkville, Patapsco, Perry Hall, Pikesville and Sparrows Point.

The costliest scenario, at \$600 million, aligns with the fiscal 2019 capital plan that’s already in place. That would include relocating 2,027 students, building additions at Sparrows Point and Dundalk, redistricting at 10 schools, and building replacement schools at Towson, Loch Raven, Lansdowne and Dulaney.

The scenarios do not attempt to predict how much financial assistance for building additions or replacement schools could come from the state government.

None of the seven scenarios deals with facility issues or conditions, only with crowding and capacity, to the chagrin of some at the forum.

James Kitchel, who has two students currently in the county school system and two who have graduated high school in Baltimore County, said he thinks the county is “biting off more than it can chew.”

Instead of trying to solve crowding at every school in the county at once, he said, the school system should consider acting regionally to fix problems at four or five schools at a time.

Kitchel said he was “disheartened” because the scenarios focused solely on capacity, not on issues of building and instruction quality, a concern shared by others.

“Just because a school has some capacity doesn’t [always] mean you should send kids there,” said Nicholas Stewart, vice chair of the Board of Education.

Stewart, who represents Council District 1 on the board, cited Lansdowne High School as an example of a

school that has excess capacity but, because of its physical condition, may not be the best place to send more students.

Stewart is not a candidate for the board this year.

County Councilman [Tom Quirk](#), who represents District 1, where Catonsville High School is located, said that under its current spending and budget model, Baltimore County does not “have the money for two new high schools.”

Quirk said building two new high schools in the next six years “would consume most of our capital budget in its entirety.” He said members of the County Council, school board and the county executive who are elected in November will ultimately make the decisions.

“I think at some point Baltimore County is going to have to come to a collective decision ... If we value new schools, services, how much of what we want are we willing to pay for?” he said.

Those attending a forum, as well as stakeholders who do not attend, will be able to take an online survey to provide feedback to the school system.

For more information, to take the survey or to view all the proposed scenarios, go to www.bcps.org/system/high-school-capacity-study.html.

cboteler@baltsun.com

twitter.com/codyboteler

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