

BILL: Senate Bill 483
TITLE: Public Schools - Sprinkler Systems - Required
DATE: February 13, 2018
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) opposes Senate Bill 483 because it would impose a well-intended but unwarranted and fiscally unsound mandate to install sprinkler systems in all public schools.

First, MABE supports high standards for school facility design, construction and maintenance, including fire safety standards. MABE does not believe that mandating the retrofitting of sprinkler systems in all schools is either justified from a safety standpoint or reasonable relative to the substantial lost opportunity to invest facilities funds in more beneficial ways. In terms of safety standards, the Department of General Services (DGS) reviews design development and construction documents for each State funded project to ensure that the facility meets industry design standards and certain state safety standards including fire safety standards. In addition, schools are required to conduct fire safety drills; drills which are dependent on whether sprinkler systems are present.

In 2017, legislation was enacted to align the required number of fire drills with the State Fire prevention Code, which is established under § 6-206 of the Public Safety Article. The State Fire Prevention Code requires school facilities with automatic sprinkler systems to hold five fire drills per year, with at least two occurring in the first four months of the school year. Schools that are not fully protected by automatic sprinkler systems must hold eight fire drills annually, with at least three scheduled in the first four months of the school year.

In this context, MABE supports local discretion to adopt programs and policies to maintain and improve school safety and security. For example, the current FY 2019 Capital Improvement Program for Public School Construction includes many requests for state and local funding approval for sprinkler systems and fire alarm upgrades. In other instances, for property leased or owned by a school system or by a charter school, for use as a public school building, the local school system or charter school must obtain all approvals required by the fire marshal and other State and local agencies prior to submission of the request for approval to the State Superintendent. MABE believes this process, combined with the assurance that all newly constructed and major renovated schools have sprinkler systems installed, ensures that all schools are operated according to high fire safety standards.

In addition, newly constructed and substantially remodeled schools must have carbon monoxide detectors installed in areas of new and existing educational occupancies where fuel fired equipment is present. The law specifies that the detectors must be installed in accordance with National Fire Protection Association's Standards, and that a signal from the carbon monoxide detector must be transmitted automatically to an approved supervising station or constantly attended on-site location.

Again, each local board of education supports federal, State, and local government funding for local public school safety programs and facility upgrades which are essential to maintaining safe and secure schools and access to a quality education for all of Maryland's students. Although MABE appreciates the intent of this bill to heighten awareness regarding fire safety in schools, MABE must strongly object to the proposed mandate to prioritize such projects, in light of the significant cost and level of facility safety already ensured under current standards.

For these reasons, MABE urges this Committee to issue an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 483.