

A Continued Lost Opportunity

2008 Thornton Update

Executive Summary

A new analysis by Advocates for Children and Youth shows a continued pattern by school districts to redirect money intended for interventions that low-performing students need to succeed in school and which were supposed to be funded through the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools ("Thornton") Act. The study shows a further breakdown in the required review process by the Maryland State Department of Education and defiance by the State Superintendent of a legislative order to have an independent study identify the educational enhancements districts have made for low-performing students since Thornton.

Baltimore County Public Schools is still spending less on its low-performing students than before Thornton. Of the final Thornton installment received in Fiscal Year (FY) 2008, it spent 5 percent of additional funds allocated for low-performing students on low-performing students, and it provided summer school to 13 percent of its low-performing eighth graders in 2007.

Montgomery County Public Schools is still spending less on its low-performing students than before Thornton. Of the final FY 2008 installment, it spent none of the extra state funds allocated for low-performing students on low-performing students.

Prince George's County Public Schools is spending 10 percent of the \$160 million in extra funds it has received for low-performing students since Thornton on low-performing students. This reflects progress during FY 2008; however, the documentation is so unclear it provides little information about the nature of targeted help students are actually receiving. In 2007, the district provided summer school to 5 percent of its low-performing eighth graders.

The documentation reviewed by the Maryland State Department of Education is so incomplete, inaccurate and non-specific as to preclude a meaningful understanding of what a district is planning to do. It does not seem possible that MSDE could have made any decisions based on this information.

MSDE carefully controlled an independent study ordered by the legislature, and it failed to provide the critical information requested about the extent of spending on low-performing students.

Advocates for Children and Youth is asking for budget language requiring that state funds intended for low-performing students be spent on those students. It also seeks an investigation into the failure of the Maryland State Department of Education to provide answers to the clarifications ordered by the Maryland General Assembly.



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Introduction

This report examines how school districts are spending additional state funds they have received through the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, commonly called Thornton. It also examines the role of the Maryland State Department of Education in ensuring that Thornton is implemented effectively and independently examined, as required by law.

Thornton was enacted by the Maryland General Assembly in 2002 and has provided an infusion of \$1.5 billion in state funding to local school districts to meet the constitutional mandate of providing students with a “thorough and adequate” education.

Thornton law originated because Maryland failed to meet state standards in educational performance. Prior to Thornton, the state standard was to have 70 percent of students achieve satisfactory performance on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). There was a low level of statewide performance and a wide disparity in educational achievement within the State.

The Thornton Commission sought equity in educational quality across local education systems. The funding system was devised to ensure that all children, regardless of geographic location, receive an adequate education.

Thornton established four new funding formulas. The first provided what an average child needed to meet state standards. Three additional formulas were based on the additional services needed by special education, limited English proficient and low-income children. The new funding formulas were phased in over five years, FY 2004 through FY 2008.

Thornton required local jurisdictions to develop five-year master plans on how they would use the extra funding to improve student performance. Each plan needed to document the individual school system’s goals and strategies to improve achievement among all student groups. The plans had to include strategies to address the performance of “students failing to meet, or failing to make progress towards meeting, state performance standards.” Master plans “shall include strategies to address any disparities in achievement.”¹

¹ Annotated Code of Maryland §5-401(f). Comprehensive master plans.

Thornton requires the State Superintendent to review master plans to ensure compliance and request changes if student sub-groups do not show progress towards meeting state standards. A school board could not implement a plan without the approval of the State Superintendent. Master plan updates are required each year.

The General Assembly had the foresight to require independent evaluations.

2007 Analysis

In a previous report, Advocates for Children and Youth found that school districts had reduced spending on low-performing students, despite receiving an extra \$491 million specifically for these students during the 2006-7 school year.²

This report updates the initial analysis with information from FY 2008, the year when school districts received the final installment of additional Thornton funding. The report is based on an examination of public documents, including master plan updates and school district budgets. Each school district was sent the analysis and asked to provide factual corrections.

A technical appendix with detailed information about revenues and expenditures for the districts examined is available on our website.

Expenditure Analysis

Baltimore County Public Schools is still spending less on its low-performing students than before Thornton (Figure 1). Of the final Thornton installment received in FY 2008, it spent 5 percent on low-performing students, and it provided summer school to 13 percent of its low-performing eighth graders.³

Montgomery County Public Schools is still spending less on its low-performing students than before Thornton (Figure 2). In FY 2008, it spent none of its final Thornton installment allocated for low-performing students on low-performing students. An extra \$3 million in spending came from increased federal funds earmarked for these students through the Title I program.

² Advocates for Children and Youth, *Opportunity Lost? Impact of Thornton on At Risk Student Funding, Services, and Achievement* (Feb. 2007).

³ Advocates for Children and Youth, *Thornton Update: Unmet Summer School Needs in Baltimore County* (Sept. 2007).

Prince George's County Public Schools is spending 10 percent of the \$160 million in extra funds it has received for low-performing students since Thornton on low-performing students (Figure 3). This reflects progress during FY 2008; however, the documentation is unclear and provides little information about the nature of the help students are actually receiving. The district provided summer school to 5 percent of its low-performing eighth graders.⁴

State Review Process

The documentation reviewed by the Maryland State Department of Education is so incomplete, inaccurate and non-specific as to preclude a meaningful understanding of what a district is planning to do and what it actually does do with state funds. Only by looking at school district budgets is more information available; even then, there are areas of significant lack of clarity.

Prince George's County Schools is an example. The FY 2008 documentation leaves out \$40 million in spending that actually occurred. Many of the stated expenditures are vaguely described, and a large, unspecified cut is suggested. It does not seem possible that MSDE could have made any decisions based on this information.

Independent Evaluation

In response to concerns about school district spending, the General Assembly requested an independent study due December 2007.⁵ The Department of Legislative Services asked that the evaluation identify the substantial educational enhancements each school has made since the passage of Thornton, the cost of each enhancement, the number of positions required for each enhancement, and the populations served by each enhancement.

To conduct the study, MSDE selected MGT of America in a no-bid contract for \$345,000. The evaluation conducted by MGT did not identify the substantial enhancements made by individual school systems, the cost of those enhancement or the populations served. In short, the report failed to address a critical issue that the General Assembly specifically asked to be examined, going to the heart of whether funds allocated for low-performing students were being spent on services for those students.

MGT interviewed Chief Financial Officers (CFO) for each school system to determine how allocated funds were meeting the needs of low-income students. The

⁴ Advocates for Children and Youth, *Thornton Update: Unmet Summer School Needs in Prince George's County* (Sept. 2007).

⁵ SB 907 (Maryland, 2007).

interview questions included the issue of substantial education enhancements for low-performing students.⁶ However, the results of the interviews with the CFOs are not included within MGT's report.

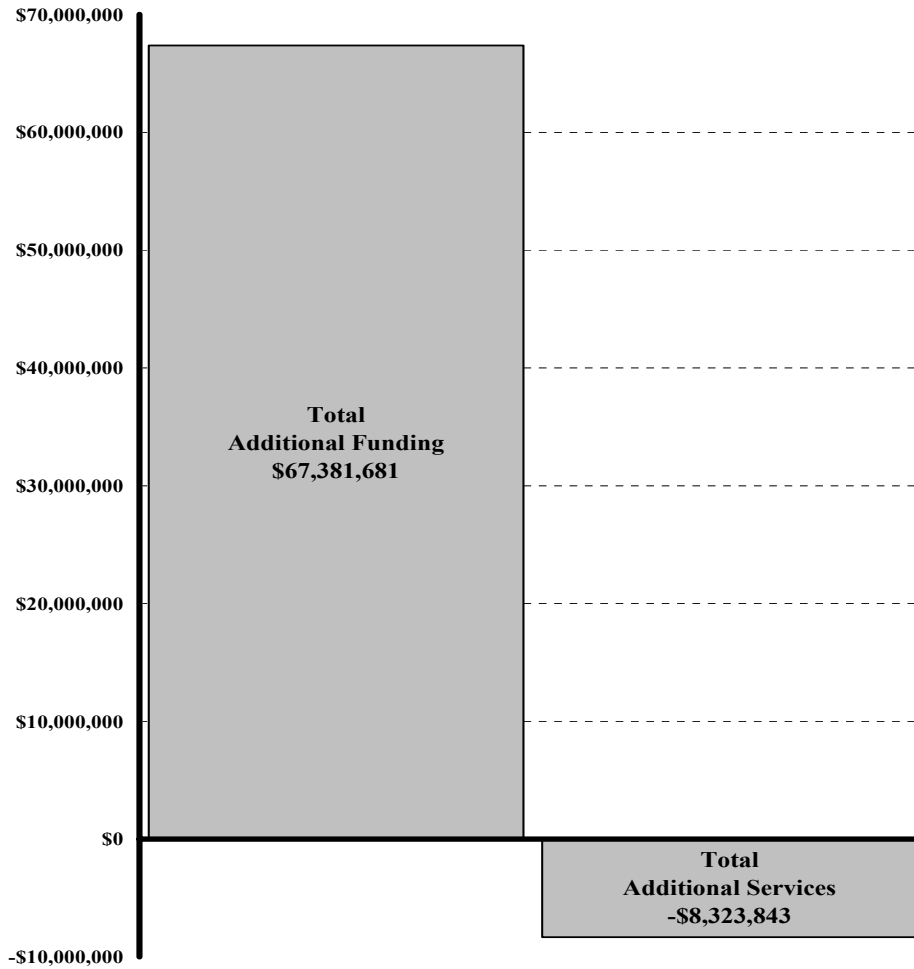
Recommendations

1. The General Assembly can insert budget language to ensure that Thornton funds intended for low-performing students are spent on those services.
2. As part of new master plans required in 2008, the General Assembly can require that school districts provide clear, accurate and complete information about the services being provided to low-performing students.
3. The General Assembly can investigate the failure of the Maryland State Department of Education to provide an independent study that addressed spending on low-performing students, as required by law.⁷
4. The General Assembly can require that the next Thornton study, due December 2008, be conducted independent of the Maryland State Department of Education.

⁶ MGT of America, *An Evaluation of the Effect of Increased State Aid to Local School Systems Through the Bridge to Excellence Act: Interim Report (Volume II: Appendices page C-15)*. (Dec. 2007).

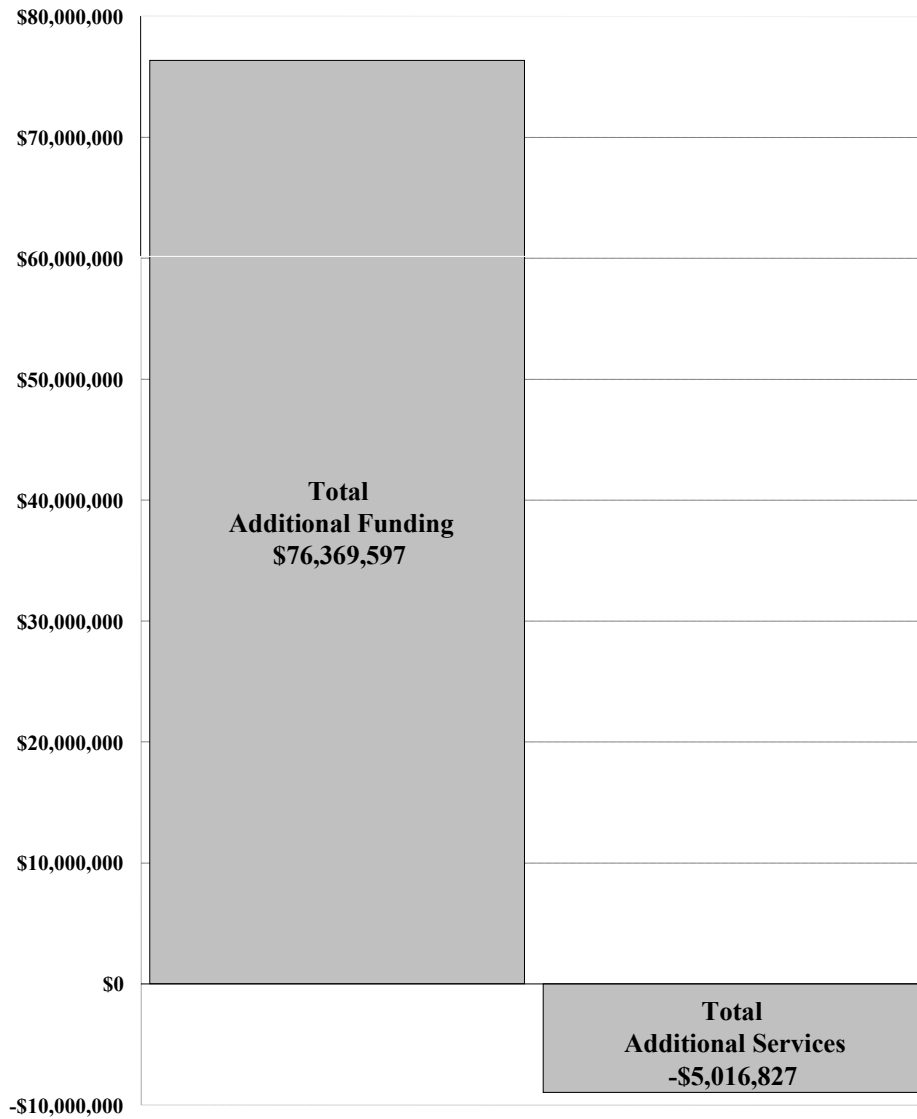
⁷ Advocates for Children and Youth has sent a letter to President of the Senate Mike Miller and Speaker of the House Mike Busch requesting such an investigation.

Figure 1: Baltimore County Public Schools



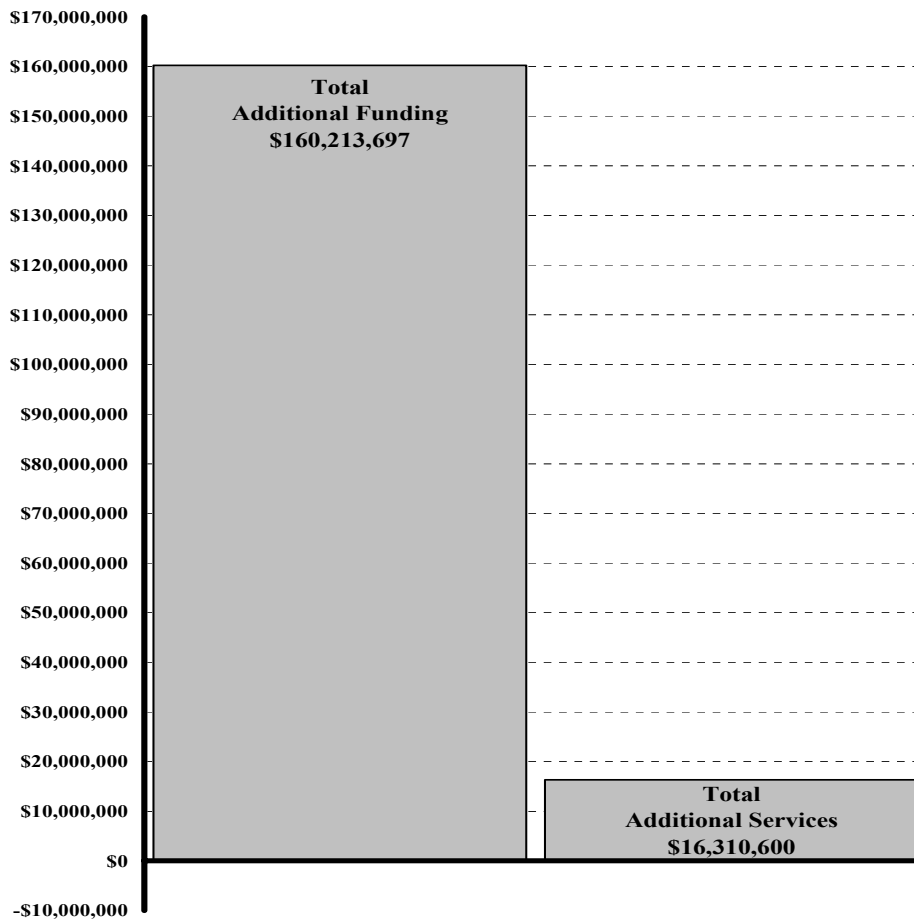
This chart reflects an additional year of data on how Baltimore County Public Schools is using Thornton funds to enhance services for low-performing students. Baltimore County Public Schools received \$12.9 million more funding for low-performing students in FY 2008 than they did in FY 2007. They are spending five percent of the funding on low-performing students, i.e., an increase of \$0.6 million. Overall, Baltimore County Public Schools received \$67 million more for low-performing students in FY 2008 than they did in FY 2003, the year before the Thornton funding formula for low-performing students was enacted. Baltimore County Public Schools is spending \$8 million less for additional services for these students than they did in FY 2003. Detailed charts are found in the technical appendix. This continued pattern affirms the need for the Maryland State Board of Education to ensure that school districts are using Thornton funds as intended and for the General Assembly to take action if needed.

Figure 2: Montgomery County Public Schools



This chart reflects an additional year of data on how Montgomery County Public Schools is using Thornton funds to enhance services for low-performing students. Montgomery County Public Schools received \$25.4 million more funding for low-performing students in FY 2008 than it did in FY 2007. It is spending an additional \$3 million on low-performing schools, all of which came from an increase in federal funding through the Title I program. Overall, Montgomery County Public Schools received \$76.3 million more for low-performing students in FY 2008 than it did in FY 2003, the year before the Thornton funding formula for low-performing students was enacted. Montgomery County Public Schools is spending \$5 million less for additional services for these students than it did in FY 2003. Detailed charts are found in the technical appendix. This continued pattern affirms the need for the Maryland State Board of Education to ensure that school districts are using Thornton funds as intended and for the General Assembly to take action if needed.

Figure 3: Prince George's County Public Schools



This chart reflects an additional year of data on how Prince George's County Public Schools is using Thornton funds to enhance services for low-performing students. Prince George's County Public Schools is spending \$16.3 million more for additional services for these students than it did in FY 2003. It received \$38 million more funding for low-performing students in FY 2008 than it did in FY 2007 and increased spending by \$27 million. Overall, Prince George's County Public Schools received \$160.2 million more for low-performing students in FY 2008 than they did in FY 2003, the year before the Thornton funding formula for low-performing students was enacted. Detailed charts are found in the technical appendix. This continued pattern affirms the need for the Maryland State Board of Education to ensure that school districts are using Thornton funds as intended and for the General Assembly to take action if needed.