

# Bill proposes to elect Howard school board members by district

**Amanda Yeager and Lisa Philip · Contact Reporters**

Howard County Times

---

## SHARE THIS

A new bill from two Howard legislators seeks to change the way the county's School Board is elected

---

OCTOBER 16, 2015, 3:05 PM

**C**iting a need for more accountability and diversity on the Howard County Board of Education, two local legislators have drafted a bill that would change the way its members are elected.

**Howard County Councilman Jon Weinstein** and state Del. Vanessa Atterbeary say they've heard from constituents who are confused about where to turn when they have a question for the board.

"People don't know who to talk to," said Atterbeary, a Democrat and the mother of three young children, including one who will soon start kindergarten.

She plans to sponsor legislation in the General Assembly that would require five of the board's seven members to be elected by district. The two remaining members would be elected at-large.

Most recently, western county parents with concerns about mold in school buildings have expressed frustration over what they say is a lack of answers and action from the school board. Though Atterbeary does not represent them in District 13, which covers parts of Columbia and Fulton, she said she thinks it's "absolutely a problem."

"As a parent, I think it's important to have your school board members accessible, it's important to know who they are, it's important they be responsive to their constituents and it's important that they be invested in the school districts that they represent," she said.

For **Weinstein**, who worked with Atterbeary to write the bill, the legislation was a campaign promise.

"In my conversations and knocking on doors and meeting folks at debates in various forms, the role of the school board came up," said the Democrat, who represents Ellicott City, ElkrIDGE and Hanover and is the father of two sons who are graduates of Mt. Hebron High School. "It seemed it was the logical approach to addressing some of the things I was hearing."

Currently, all of Howard County's school board members are elected at-large, at staggered intervals: four are elected every gubernatorial election and the other three are chosen in the presidential election.

In 2016, the terms of School Board Chairwoman Janet Siddiqui, Vice Chairwoman Ann De Lacy and member Ellen Flynn Giles will expire, putting their seats up for election.

Under Atterbeary and **Weinstein**'s bill, the three board members elected in 2016 would serve a two-year term and then would be up for election again in 2018. After that, all school board members would be elected on a four-year basis, every gubernatorial election.

**Weinstein** said getting rid of staggering would put school board elections on a level playing field, with all candidates "running in the same electoral context."

"There's a concern that people forget or don't realize that some members of the school board are elected every two years," he said. "I think [the bill] will clarify that confusion."

The five school board election districts would have the same geographic boundaries as the county's councilmanic districts.

Currently, only three councilmanic districts — 1, 4 and 5 — are represented on the board, based on each member's residency, according to **Weinstein**.

De Lacy, who is African American, and Student Member of the Board Rachel Lin, who is Asian American, are the only people of color serving on the board.

Siddiqui was not immediately available for comment Friday, but has opposed similar suggestions in the past.

Though she said she welcomes more diversity on the board, "if you start different representation for different groups, while it may benefit that certain area, it may become less equitable throughout the county in terms of trying to get resources equally distributed," she told the *Howard County Times* in 2011.

In the same story, Giles agreed, pointing out that the make-up of the school board changes on a

regular basis with elections every two years.

"It really is about a school system and not about different districts competing with one another," she said at the time.

School board member Cindy Vaillancourt said Friday that she supports the bill.

"It is time for a very great change in the way that the Board of Education is elected and functions, because it is currently not representative of the people of Howard County," she said. "With the current structure, with seven at-large members, it just takes a simple majority who could all be from same pool to make a decision."

The Howard County Education Association, the union that represents the school system's teachers, also approves of the change.

"Like parents and families, educators want a Board of Education that is responsive and sensitive to the needs of their constituents," said HCEA President Paul Lemle. "This legislation creates smaller districts, as opposed to the county-wide election today, and a better electoral system for the voters of Howard County. I think it gives voters a much better chance to get to know their board member."

This isn't the first time a switch to elections by district has been proposed for the school board. Three years ago, a commission appointed by then-County Executive Ken Ulman and led by former State Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick recommended a hybrid model, with five members elected by district and two appointed by the county executive, to increase geographic and racial diversity on the board.

"The election by councilmanic district would drive us to geographical diversity and the appointment pieces would ensure kind of a cultural diversity," commission member Kevin Doyle said at the time.

Del. Frank Turner, a Democrat from Columbia, sponsored legislation to adopt the commission's suggestions during the 2012 General Assembly session, but withdrew the bill after experiencing public pushback.

The Howard Board of Education was an appointed board until the 1970s. In 2006, the number of seats on the board expanded from five to seven.

Five other counties in Maryland, including nearby Montgomery County, elect board members through a combination of by-district and at-large seats.

School board members are appointed in Anne Arundel County, Baltimore County and Baltimore City, while in Prince George's County, all nine school board members are elected by district.

---

---

Copyright © 2015, The Baltimore Sun

**This article is related to:** [Elections](#), [Maryland General Assembly](#), [Nancy Grasmick](#)