

[Aegis](#)

Facing a \$60M deficit, how can Harford County officials fund next year's education budget?



Harford County Executive Bob Cassilly. (Dan Belson/Staff)



By [Matt Hubbard](#) | mhubbard@baltsun.com PUBLISHED: November 22, 2024 at 5:00 AM EST

County officials say funding the Harford public school system's requested \$60 million budget increase would require tax increases, while school officials warn that not covering the system's \$60 million budget deficit would result in devastating cuts for students. Both outcomes will have an impact on county residents. Here's a look at the possibilities.

Possible tax increases

Harford County Executive Bob Cassilly stated that the county saw revenue growth of only 3% this year due to stagnant state revenue growth of less than 1%. Cassilly says that when state revenues suffer, the county suffers — posing a challenge for Harford County when conversations of increased spending arise.

The majority of Harford County's revenue comes from property taxes. The county's current property tax rate is 98 cents per \$100 of assessed value. County officials said that in order to pay for the school system's \$60 million increase, the county's tax rate would need to increase by 15 cents to \$1.13 per \$100 of assessed value.

According to the national real estate brokerage corporation Redfin, the median cost of a home in Harford County is \$385,000, as of October. The owner of a \$385,000 home would pay about \$3,773 annually in property taxes, under current rates. If taxes were increased to the \$1.13 rate, that homeowner would pay about \$4,350 in property taxes.

However, Cassilly has stated on numerous occasions that he would not raise property taxes to pay for public education.

To raise an additional \$60 million for Harford schools without raising taxes or taking money from public safety, emergency services or the sheriff's office, the county government would have to cut areas of its discretionary budget. Discretionary line items are as follows:

- Harford County Public Library System (10% of which is funded by the state): \$21 million
- Harford County Parks & Recreation (parks, activity centers, and programs): \$12 million
- Housing & Community Services (including senior centers): \$8 million
- Volunteer fire companies: \$8 million (county contribution)
- Economic development (including agricultural and tourism marketing): \$5 million
- County funding for Soil Conservation & Ag Extension services: \$1 million

Superintendent Sean Bulson has said Cassilly is not adequately funding Harford County Public Schools by choice.

County budget documents show that since the fiscal 2023 budget — passed under former County Executive Barry Glassman — Harford's annual budget has increased by \$27.53 million. The largest increase, \$12.43 million, went to the sheriff's office. A separate \$10.99 million increase paid for ambulance services after the county took over countywide emergency medical services.

Funding of county schools, however, has decreased by more than \$2.88 million since Cassilly took office.

Possible school budget cuts

The Harford school system's request for a \$60 million increase in funding includes \$20 million in salary and wage packages and \$10 million due to inflation. The other \$30 million is needed because the school system took \$30 million from its savings to balance the current budget, and it cannot do that again to fund next year's budget.

Going into fiscal 2026, Harford's school system has a fund balance of about \$26 million.

Harford school officials stated that it is too early in the budget process to forecast specific cuts, but did say areas of the budget such as classroom teaching positions, student behavior resources, extracurricular activities and workforce development programs are on the chopping block.

School officials went so far as to say that they are looking into closing Darlington Elementary School as a way to save money. That school had a population of 92 students in 2023.

Bulson said that closing the school would be a last resort, should the school system not be able to balance its budget.

How did Harford schools get in this position?

Each year, state law mandates that the county government must allocate the same amount, or more, of per-pupil funding to the school system. The mandate is outlined by a formula called Maintenance of Effort.

Maintenance of Effort is calculated based on county wealth and student population. If a county allocates more money to the school system than what is required by the state, the county must maintain that level of funding the following year or give more.

In fiscal 2023, Harford's Maintenance of Effort requirement was \$293.81 million. Due to the imminent expiration of federal pandemic funds given to the county, former County Executive Barry Glassman allocated \$324.23 million to Harford schools — a historic increase of \$30.42 million.

Following Glassman's budget, Cassilly used a provision in state law that allowed Harford a one-time reduction of its Maintenance of Effort level by over \$10 million.

Cassilly's explanation for the reduction was that the county "simply couldn't afford" to continue to provide the additional \$30 million for the school budget.

In fiscal 2024, Harford's Maintenance of Effort was \$304.85 million, which Cassilly exceeded by \$10 million.

In his most recent budget, Cassilly gave Harford schools \$321.25 million — \$6.5 million over Maintenance of Effort, but nearly \$3 million less than that what was given to the school system for fiscal 2023.

Like the county, Harford schools have suffered inflationary cost increases over the past few years — straining their annual budget. Harford schools have, however, seen an increase in state funding due to the statewide education reform initiative, Blueprint for Maryland's Future, which aims to increase education funding in the state by billions over the next decade.

Cassilly argues that the reduction in county funding shouldn't matter since state funding has increased. Bulson says that an increase in state funding does not help the school system with local priorities such as reducing class sizes, since much of the state revenue is "restricted" and must be spent on things the state deems important such as resources for English learners and pre-K students.

