

City can count on them

Students: Members of the Baltimore Algebra Project have done their homework on the schools' fiscal crisis.

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During the city school system's financial crisis, while politicians bickered, and parents and community members spewed, one group emerged time and again as a powerful voice -- using reason and research to make itself heard.

Members of the Baltimore Algebra Project, a student-run organization that tutors middle- and high-school students, launched a steady campaign to inform their 90,000 peers about the problems the school system faced because of a \$58 million accumulated deficit. They staged walkouts and rallies, and theirs has been the one student group to gain a private audience with top school officials, as well as with an influential Circuit Court judge.

And in an extraordinary opportunity for students, Circuit Judge Joseph H.H. Kaplan has invited a group representative to sit alongside top state, city and school system officials, as well as American Civil Liberties Union lawyers, during a hearing tomorrow regarding a long-standing court case involving city schools.

The representative will be allowed to comment on plans school officials recently delivered to the court detailing how they intend to fix the financial mess without hurting students.

"I think it's rare that a judge invites children into his courtroom," said Susan Goering, executive director of the ACLU of Maryland, the group that sued the state on behalf of city schoolchildren. "I think it's a tribute both to the judge ... and to this group of students who have exhibited deep concerns."

Group members said being invited to the hearing is an honor they deserve.

"I feel like it's a privilege to be able to talk to them so we can show them that we're very serious about our education and what's going on," said

Chelsea Carson, 15, a sophomore at City College. "And we're not the stereotypical kids who don't care."

Tomorrow's hearing won't be the first time during the school system's financial breakdown that the student group has managed to make its view a matter of public record.

At the first city school board meeting after schools chief Bonnie S. Copeland announced the layoffs of 700 employees, adults in the room stormed and shouted. Police dragged protesters out into the December cold, and many tears were shed.

On the fringes of the circus-like atmosphere, Algebra Project members patiently waited -- to offer a solution.

The school system, the students suggested, could temporarily divert teachers' state and federal tax withholdings to cover the gaping deficit, thereby preventing further layoffs or any more disruption to their classrooms.

Their idea was radical -- not to mention illegal -- but it was reasoned -- like a math problem they had labored to solve with an often-overlooked theory.

Since that December meeting, the group's campaign has steadily gained momentum.

The group mobilized more than 600 city students in last month's student strike -- the largest demonstration of the school year -- asking not for resignations or criminal investigations, but for the only remedy they argued could fix the schools: More money.

In its after-school research -- a regular part of the group's weekly tutoring routine -- students uncovered a decade-old court case, Bradford vs. Maryland State Board of Education.

In the case, Kaplan had ruled that the state should provide the schools with at least \$2,000 more per student -- more than \$200 million every year.

The state legislature passed a bill in 2002, commonly called Thornton, to provide the city and other school districts with substantial increases in

funding until the year 2008, and many education advocates expected that that bill would fulfill Kaplan's orders. But legislators have not found a funding source for all six years, leaving the question of adequate school funding unresolved.

Even with the additional Thornton money, however, Algebra Project students wondered how much better their schools would be if Kaplan's ruling had been followed to the letter.

How much more might they have learned?

"We started wondering why the funding hadn't been given to the city and what could we do?" said Durell Callier, 18, still an Algebra Project member even though he graduated last year from Polytechnic Institute and is now a freshman at [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](#).

"There were all these people talking about the financial problems, but none of them seemed to be advocating for that money," Callier said. "If they weren't going to do it, and the parents weren't going to do it, then we said we should do it."

Many fliers, classroom information sessions and outdoor demonstrations later, their efforts have been recognized by Kaplan -- as his invitation to participate in the hearing indicates -- and others, as well.

"These kids have initiative. They have energy. They are charismatic in their own way. And they're good students," said Ron Shelley, director of the Stadium School, an innovative city middle school, where many Algebra Project members got their start. "They have this untapped energy. Just finding a forum to tap that energy is really what made the difference."

For Algebra Project members, the recognition is a long time coming.

"We had been working on this before it became a major news story," said Charnell Covert, 16, a junior at City College. "This wasn't something that just popped up on us. Unlike other groups, we didn't wait until we had nothing left."

The group first became interested in the system's finances when school officials reneged on a \$100,000 contract for the group to provide tutoring

services to middle- and high-school students -- the bulk of the group's funding. The Algebra Project is the only student-led organization to have such a contract with the school system.

Because of a money shortage, school officials apologized early this school year, the system would be able to fund only 80 percent of the contract.

"We were kind of upset that they promised to give us a certain amount of money and then they cut us at the last minute," City College's Chelsea Carson said. "We said, 'We've got to find out what's really going on.'"

That penchant for probing is a common trait of Algebra Project members. They believe that advocacy goes hand in hand with their primary tutoring focus.

It's no wonder.

Robert Moses, who founded the project 22 years ago in Cambridge, Mass., was a young civil rights worker in the 1960s. A version of the current Baltimore group started here in 1994, adding the after-school tutoring component in 2001.

Moses' political message evolved into one of economic access -- something he, and students involved in the group, believe can be gained through knowledge of higher-level math. Mastering algebra is just the beginning.

"We felt like the financial crisis was mandatory for us to get involved in because we could be losing money, not just for our project, but for all the students," Covert said. "We felt like this was a new civil rights movement, a modern one. The only difference is that this is about education, not race.

"We want justice," Covert said. "And the only way for there to be justice is through education."

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