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## Failing schools face big changes

*Board to vote today on plans to overhaul several city schools*

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SUN REPORTER

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Sparked by failing test scores at eight academically troubled schools, the city school system is considering proposals to relinquish control of the schools to local universities and other outside partners who could devise strategies for turning them around.

The school board is expected to vote on the proposals tonight. Under one proposal, four elementary/middle schools in Cherry Hill would be operated in partnership with [Towson University](#). A governing board would be established to oversee those four schools plus Morrell Park Elementary/Middle, which is already run by Towson.

In a separate vote, the board is being asked to approve plans to restructure three failing high schools - Frederick Douglass, Patterson and Northwestern - that were targeted by the state for outside takeovers last year. Each would establish its own governing board, and Douglass would operate in partnership with the Johns Hopkins University.

The eight schools would operate similarly to charter schools, public schools that operate independently.

"This is not for the faint of heart," said Jeffrey N. Grotzky, a senior researcher at Towson's College of Education. "This is real reform. Our expectations are quite high."

City school officials fought vehemently last year when the state tried to turn control of 11 failing schools - including Douglass, Patterson and Northwestern - over to outside operators. But state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick said she does not expect to renew the effort to seize control of the 11 schools, which was stalled by the legislature.

"It will change the way education is done in Cherry Hill," said Cathy McClain, executive director of the Cherry Hill Trust, an organization representing 24 community and business groups in the neighborhood. "We have evidence that the status quo doesn't work."

While charter schools are open to students citywide, the Cherry Hill elementary/middle schools - Cherry Hill, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Arundel and Patapsco - would remain zoned neighborhood schools.

Morrell Park and the schools in Cherry Hill all serve children in prekindergarten through eighth grade, and all five have repeated years of low performance on state standardized tests. More than half of the third- through fifth-graders at the five schools failed the state's reading and math tests last year.

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The new governing board would be co-chaired by Grotzky, a former chief of staff in the city schools, and Linda Chinnia, the city schools' chief academic officer.

Specific plans for overhauling the five schools are included in the plan going to the school board tonight. In the future, the new governing board would need to run major changes by interim Chief Executive Officer Charlene Cooper Boston, who called the partnership "an innovative approach to tackling problems."

The governing board would include parents and staff from all five schools, plus a wide network of education groups that have offered their assistance. Each of the five schools would also have its own local board.

The Center for Summer Learning at the Johns Hopkins University would run a new summer school program. Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign would start new programs after school.

New Leaders for New Schools would train principals to lead as positions opened. While the city's charter schools are embroiled in a court battle over how much money they are entitled to receive, the funding of Towson's schools would not change. But the schools would gain autonomy over how they spend their money.

The state school board would need to sign off on Towson running Cherry Hill, Woodson and Arundel. All three have failed to meet standards on state tests for so many years that they are required to restructure.

The state must approve those restructuring plans, as well as the restructuring plans for Douglass, Patterson and Northwestern.

In Cherry Hill, the arrangement would be an expansion of a partnership between the university and the community that began last summer.

Towson is already sending student teachers and tutors to work in Cherry Hill schools, with the goal of recruiting them to work in the city after graduation. It has donated more than 100 computers. And it is holding classes in the neighborhood for teachers who are not yet considered "highly qualified" - certified with subject expertise - under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Meanwhile, Douglass has a long and storied history in Baltimore's black community, and its graduates include former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and others luminaries. But the school has been in decline recently, and last year its graduation rate was just 56 percent.

During the past several years, the school system has broken up many of its large high schools into smaller, more personalized environments. Douglass, Northwestern, Patterson and Forest Park are the only large zoned high schools remaining in the city.

Under the proposal that the school board is to vote on tonight, Douglass and Northwestern would cut their enrollments. Douglass would reduce its student body by about 300, from 1,100 to 800.

Officials could not say how large a cut they're anticipating at Northwestern, which serves 1,000 students. Nor could they say whether Patterson, which has an enrollment of 1,600, would stay the same size.

The three schools would remain intact as single high schools, but they would establish small academies within them. Douglass would adopt the Talent Development model developed by Hopkins to reform failing high schools, bringing a different curriculum and career training for students. Ninth-graders would receive intensive remedial instruction, attending a mandatory four- to six-week summer program, while 10th- through 12th-graders would choose an academy based on a theme that interests them.

Patterson would adopt a reform initiative developed by the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board called High Schools That Work. The initiative, used in 1,200 schools nationwide, stresses a culture of high expectations and academic work that is

applicable in the students' daily lives. It also prepares students for specific careers.

Already this school year, Patterson has started academies for students interested in finance, surgery and firefighting.

Northwestern would model itself after another city school, Digital Harbor High, which prepares students for careers in technology. The plans for the three high schools were formulated by committees including staff, parents and community representatives.

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