

EDUCATION GOVERNMENT &amp; POLITICS HEALTH CARE

# Is it time to revisit and bolster a decades-old law aimed at managing pest control in Maryland schools?

By Danielle J. Brown September 11, 2023



*Getty Images photo.*

Amid fretting and high hopes that their children will succeed in the academic year, concerns that students could be exposed to toxic pesticides might not be the first thought on parents' minds.

But ensuring that Maryland schools reduce pesticide-exposure has been an ongoing concern for groups like the Maryland Pesticide Education Network and the Children's Environmental Health Network, who have been advocating for clear policies on pesticide use in schools for years.

Maryland has had a state law requiring implementation of what's called an Integrated Pest Management Plan for all school districts since the late 90's, but the two groups worry that miscommunication from Maryland Department of Agriculture has made it difficult for school districts to properly comply with the law for decades.

"Now, we've had an election. We have a new governor. We have a new legislature and we do have a new secretary," said Veronika Carella, Legislative Director for the Children's Environmental Health Network. "We are pushing very hard for them to understand what needs to change. And we are very hopeful that it will change. But in the meantime, the school year has started, and kids have started going back to school under these conditions."

Pesticides have a long history of health concerns, especially when children are involved. According to a [report](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2012, children are uniquely susceptible to the potential toxicities of pesticides.

"Epidemiologic evidence demonstrates associations between early life exposure to pesticides and pediatric cancers, decreased cognitive function, and behavioral problems," the report said. It added that many chemicals in pesticides are classified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as carcinogens.

Since the 2012 report, additional concerns have emerged regarding the use of pesticides, including reports that some pesticides contain PFAS, which are also known as "forever chemicals" that can lead to high cancer risks.

The issue of PFAS (perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances) is such a pressing concern that the 2023 Maryland General Assembly [passed a law](#) requiring the Department of Agriculture to study the use of PFAS chemicals in the state and deliver the findings to the governor and legislators by November.

And the enforcement of Maryland's regulations on integrated pest management policies in schools has had a rocky history, the Maryland Pesticide Education Network says.

"There have been these longstanding problems in the implementation since it went into effect. We're concerned because many counties are still missing crucial elements of the law," said Bonnie Raindrop, program director for the nonprofit.

Maryland's Integrated Pest Management in Schools law was passed in 1997 and expanded to school grounds with additional legislation in 1999. It requires school boards to create an "integrated pest management" program to reduce the health, economic and aesthetic impacts of pests in school environments. The plan should include methods that are preventative in nature, such as sanitation, structural repair, and other non-chemical methods. Then, when "all nontoxic options are unreasonable or have been exhausted," chemical pesticides would be used to control a pest infestation.

Manuals were developed to help implement the new law, but had to be corrected several years later for misrepresenting scope of the law. [An errata sheet](#) was issued in 2010 to notify school districts of the incongruities between the state law and the manuals, including language that integrated pest management was an optional, rather than mandatory, approach.

But even as corrections have been issued, the Maryland Pesticide Education Network and Maryland Children's Environmental Health Coalition worry that most school districts have incomplete or outdated pest management policies.

According to the Maryland Pesticide Education Network analysis, most school districts do not provide a list of pesticides that are permitted within their integrated pest control programs. Other plans are decades old and have not been updated since the late nineties. Over a dozen plans do not directly address the policies for pest control on school grounds, which has been a requirement since 1999, according to the group's analysis.

Without thorough and descriptive school plans regarding pest control, the advocates are concerned that many school children may be at risk of exposure to pesticides if school districts are not careful with their pesticide use.

Meanwhile, Department of Agriculture pest management inspectors issued over 270 violation citations throughout 1,100 inspections across Maryland school districts in 2022, according to a [December report](#) from the Department of Agriculture.

Clear district policies surrounding the use of pesticides in schools can help families and faculty exist in safe and healthy learning environments, which is why those two groups have been tracking the issue for decades.

Ruth Berlin, executive director of the Maryland Pesticide Education Network, says that she's encouraged by the new administration under Gov. Wes Moore (D).

"It's going to take some time...And there's a lot that needs to change. A lot of education and training. You know, 'who's supposed to be doing what.' 'What's the difference between a policy and a plan and a regulation?' and all that good stuff," she said.

The Maryland Department of Agriculture has agreed to connect with the groups and discuss their concerns.

Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Atticks says that from the Department's perspective, the agency has an integrated pest management plan from each school district in Maryland on file, though some of those plans have not been updated for several years.

The agency is not ruling out that there could be room for improvement.

"We want to, obviously as the regulating agency, be helpful and proactive and be cooperative. If there's any suggestions, we'd like to hear them, and there is a good chance that we can work together to approach some changes," Atticks said.

"If there are ways that we can work together," Atticks said. "Whether the issue is about compliance or whether the issue is about communication — there's probably changes that can be made."

Atticks told Maryland Matters that pest control is an ever-changing challenge for the department, and factors such as climate change can lead to new pests entering Maryland.

“Pests are an evolving concern. It’s not like we’re dealing with today the pests we were dealing with in 1997 — there are new pests,” he said. “I’m not talking just schools in general, just broadly. We’re seeing invasive pests and non-native pests.”

“Things like the spotted-lantern fly. We’ve had the emerald ash borer (beetle) that have come in and have devastated parts of the industry — or trees in my own yard,” he added.

As for schools specifically, the age of a school building can play a factor.

“Everything is an evolution. When the school building was new you didn’t have as many pests,” he said. “As schools get 20, 30 years in, there are new waves of pest pressures that come and go. It’s a serious issue that needs to be dealt with.”

And he argued that some aspects of pest control necessitate the use of pesticides. Understanding the potential risk-factor involved in exposure, particularly with school-aged kids, is why it is important to ensure that such chemicals are used safely.

“Its critical that we have these tools and we use these tools responsibly,” he said.

Atticks said that as conversations around the use of pesticides in schools continue, it’s possible that the 1997 law may get another look.

“It may not have aged well and we (may) need to update it,” he said.



## Danielle J. Brown

### Reporter

Danielle J. Brown is a new Maryland resident covering health care and equity for Maryland Matters. Previously, she covered state education policy for three years at the Florida Phoenix, along with other topics such as abortion access and LGBTQ+ issues. Born and raised in Tallahassee, Florida, she is a 2018 graduate of Florida State University, where she served as an editorial intern for International Program’s annual magazine. She has also contributed stories to Rowland Publishing and reviewed community theater productions for the Tallahassee Democrat.

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