

**SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH & ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
SENATE BILL 367: STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION - GUIDELINES ON  
TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH**

**MARCH 3, 2020**

**POSITION: SUPPORT**

The Positive Schools Center (PSC), part of the University of Maryland, School of Social Work partners with schools and districts to identify, collaborate and provide support around issues related to school climate and punitive discipline. The PSC is also the lead agency for nine community schools and a member of the Maryland Coalition to Reform School Discipline (“CRSD”). **The PSC strongly supports SB367**, which would establish the Trauma-Informed Schools Initiative in the State Department of Education to expand the use of the trauma-informed approach used in schools and intensively train schools on becoming trauma-informed schools.

Baltimore City’s well-known educational and social challenges are rooted in a long history of racism, housing segregation, and economic discrimination. This institutional and structural racism has resulted in chronic underinvestment in Baltimore’s housing, schools, and other vital services and high rates of generational concentrated poverty.<sup>1</sup>

These unjust policies and practices are reflected today in the more than 30% of Baltimore City children who have experienced at least two traumatic events.<sup>2</sup> These adverse experiences have been documented to affect the development of children’s brains and their behavior in school.<sup>3</sup>

Trauma disproportionately impacts children of color at every step with black and brown children more likely than white students to live in disinvested neighborhoods where trauma is more common.<sup>4</sup> They are more likely to be referred to the office when exhibiting

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<sup>1</sup> Vooris, A. (2016). *Race, Racism, and Baltimore's Future: A Focus on Structural and Institutional Racism*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Child & Adolescent Measurement Initiative (2014). “Adverse Childhood Experiences among Baltimore and Maryland’s Children.” U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Health Resources & Services Administration, Maternal & Child Health Bureau. Retrieved from [www.childhealthdata.com](http://www.childhealthdata.com).

<sup>3</sup> Shaia, W., & Crowder, S. (2017). Schools as retraumatizing environments. *Linking Health and Education for African American Students’ Success*, 69–82.

<sup>4</sup> Vooris, A. (2016). *Race, Racism, and Baltimore's Future: A Focus on Structural and Institutional Racism*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute.

challenging behavior, more likely to have that referral turn into a detention or suspension, and more likely to be targeted by our criminal justice system.<sup>5</sup>

Research on school climate suggests that students are more responsive to authority when schools have a climate where adults show care for students and are firm in their expectations of behavior.<sup>6</sup> The PSC is proud to partner with schools and districts on this transformative trauma-informed work.

One of our Southwest Baltimore community schools demonstrates their commitment to trauma-informed practices through their handling of discipline and misconduct. The school is intentional about reinforcing healthy and positive behavior in a way that involves the students in their growth. For instance, one student at this school finds it difficult to finish in-class assignments on a regular basis because he is sleep deprived before he arrives at school. To better support this student, graduate social work interns helped his teacher to implement restorative interventions within the classroom. Rather than penalizing unwanted behaviors, they utilize a token economy system that rewards and highlights behaviors that incentivizes this student to reach their goals. They are collaboratively supporting this student and empowering him to navigate through these challenges. He has been more consistent in his academic performance due to these incentives and collaborative intervention. This trauma-informed approach provided this student an opportunity to grow and progress.

Trauma-informed care at this school is also demonstrated through peer-mediation groups. While more traditional school settings might address conflict with punishment or suspension, this school utilizes mediation as a way to help students make decisions that address the conflict and move forward. Towards the beginning of the school year, one of the teachers brought it to the Community School Coordinator's attention that she had a group of five third-grade girls that were constantly arguing, forming cliques, and bullying one another. Instead of punishing the girls each time they would fight in class, she realized that it would be best practice to have someone sit down with them and help them resolve the conflict together. The Community School Coordinator and graduate social work interns were then able to sit down with the teacher and hear about the conflict from her perspective. It was clear that the teacher had a positive relationship with each of the students. She was familiar with the unique situations that each individual was facing both in and out of the classroom, including learning styles, academic and social strengths, family situations, etc.

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<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw, K. W. (2015). *Black Girls Matter: Pushed out, Overpoliced and Underprotected*. New York, NY: Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, C., Engberg, J., Grimm, G., Lee, E., Wang, E., Christianson, K., & Joseph, A. (2018). *Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions? An Evaluation of the Impact of Restorative Practices in a Mid-Sized Urban School District*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.



UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

*STRENGTHENING SOCIETY*

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In the first session of the group, the students worked together to create the group rules, norms, and culture, so they would know what to expect and what would be expected of them each time they came to the group. As the sessions went on, they practiced building conflict management techniques and positive social skills. For example, the girls took turns listening to a specific conflict from one another's perspectives without interrupting. This allowed them to practice respecting one another, while also forming insight on how the others felt in the situation. Ultimately, these peer-mediation groups are a means of modelling and teaching students to handle uncomfortable social situations, develop empathy towards their peers, and communicate their emotions in healthy and constructive ways.

We can't expect students to be academically successful unless we provide a positive school climate that is trauma-informed and supports the whole child.

**For these reasons, the PSC strongly supports Senate Bill 367.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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