

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL 202: RESTORATIVE SCHOOLS FUND AND GRANTS -

ESTABLISHMENT

January 30, 2020

POSITION: SUPPORT

Madam Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman, and committee members,

My name is Heather Stone, and I am asking for your support for HB 202. I am the Assistant Principal at Afya Public Charter School. We are a Baltimore City Public School located in the Belair-Edison Neighborhood of Baltimore City. This is my twenty-first year working in public schools. My experience is in high poverty, high need districts. In my current position, I am responsible for maintaining a culture that is conducive to learning for students and for staff. This role is challenging. Per the Baltimore City Health Department's 2017 Neighborhood Health Profile the Belair Edison neighborhood is considered one of the least healthy city neighborhoods for

- Homicide
- Youth Homicide
- Animal Abuse
- Rat Service Requests

The amount of trauma my students are exposed to continues to shock me, even after all these years. Parents murdered, family members incarcerated, substance abuse, homelessness. Just this week, some of our students passed by a dead body on the way to school. This trauma takes an enormous toll on students and the staff who love

them. Creating an environment which is orderly, loving and responsive to trauma is a difficult task.

When I began my training with the Positive School's Center I was skeptical, I have seen many, many programs come and go with very little lasting impact, I had no reason to believe this would be different. So I began my work with them with some eye rolling and teeth sucking, I do work with middle schoolers, skeptical at best. I left a convert.

We began implementation of restorative practices just this year. The entire staff was trained and we committed and focused on the implementation of this program. Even in these initial stages of implementation, the impact has been enormous. Discipline referrals and out of school suspensions have been reduced.

Restorative Practices provide a framework to create a classroom and school community. Community is essential to responding to the trauma in our students' lives, Restorative Practices is intentional and prioritizes this important work. Restorative Practices recognizes that students cannot learn when in a state of crisis. The educators job, as important as teaching math or reading, is to take good care of the whole child. We recognize that students are more equipped to learn when feeling safe. The great educator Fred Rogers said, *"when we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary."* Traumatized children need daily opportunities to connect with caring adults in a nurturing community. Restorative Practices does not take the place of teaching around self discipline and creating a culture of high expectations. Restorative Practices provides a tool to help school staff achieve those positive characteristics.

Before making a disciplinary decision around an incident, there is always a discussion between myself, our dean and student support specialist. The question we always ask each other is “are we being restorative”. For all parties involved: the victim, the offender, school staff and the school environment. It is a cultural shift, moving away from a punitive approach to a restorative one.

As I sit here typing this I am watching two eighth grade girls running their own restorative circle. This is not an unusual scenario, messages go back and forth on social media, parents call each other and begin to fight over the phone. Families become angry and children carry that anger into the school. This has all the ingredients for a fight, which could lead to suspension or worse someone getting hurt. Instead, the girls are talking it out. Not only is a potentially harmful incident avoided, but they are learning social and emotional skills that will serve them for the rest of their life. This does not happen by accident. Providing the resources to implement Restorative Practices is vital. What I have discovered this year is something that looks very simple on the surface is actually quite complicated. Providing the resources to support implementation is vital.

I am hoping that you will agree and vote in favor of HB 202.

Thank you,

Heather Stone

Assistant Principal

Afya Public Charter School

