

**HOUSE WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE
HOUSE BILL 1443: COMMISSION ON STUDENT BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND MENTAL
HEALTH TREATMENT**

March 6, 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 the lead agency of nine community schools in Baltimore City. The PSC is also a member of the Maryland Coalition to Reform School Discipline (“CRSD”). **The PSC strongly supports HB 1443**, which would establish the Commission on Student Behavioral Health and Mental Health Treatment, require the Commission to study, evaluate, update, and revise guidelines for student behavioral health treatment and make recommendations to improve current practices.

There is a lack of comprehensive school-based mental health services in Maryland schools. Not only do Maryland schools need more adequate mental and behavioral health services, but they also need proper guidance to improve existing services to better meet the needs of our students. We believe the establishment of this commission will fill a critical role in evaluating current practices and creating recommendations to expand access to school mental and behavioral health services needed by school staff and students in Maryland.

Team members who support one of our community schools explain the mental and behavioral health challenges facing the school:

Some of the current challenges facing students at this school include housing instability, parent/guardian unemployment, chronic illness of parent/guardian, and lack of dependable transportation to and from school. Continual systemic deprivation of basic resources causes trauma among students. Within the school, students witness daily physical and verbal violence, mostly peer-to-peer, but on



occasion teacher-to-peer,, which enhances students' trauma symptoms. Trauma symptoms exhibited by students include the inability to concentrate, tiredness, irritability, anger, sadness, and suicidal/self-harm behaviors. The school is inadequately equipped to manage the trauma symptoms and behaviors of its 820 students, grades pre-K through 8. Furthermore, as the school year goes on, trauma symptoms worsen as teachers and staff "burn-out," which leads to an increase of in-school conflict and a decrease in student academic performance. Without adequate behavioral health resources and support, students in high-trauma environments are unable to perform at their full potential. It is important for us to understand the larger community when looking at the mental and behavioral health of our students. We need to understand how these outside experiences are affecting students when they are in school. This understanding, paired with adequate training on how to respond to students' needs, will help staff to respond to and manage challenging displays of poor mental health like aggression and lashing out, with more compassion and tact.

HB 1443 understands that students need mental and behavioral health support inside and outside the classroom and that these challenges are both common and complex. By establishing a commission to study and analyze these challenges, this bill aims to better support students. If enacted, HB 1443 will make schools better places for both children and adults.

For these reasons, the PSC strongly supports House Bill 1443.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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