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House Bill 488: Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program - Mental Health Professionals in Public Schools

Hearing before the House Committee on Ways and Means, February 15, 2023

Position: FAVORABLE

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a nonprofit legal services organization which advocates for social justice, and economic and racial equity in Maryland, including by upholding the rights of historically excluded and underserved students through individual representation, community outreach, and systemic advocacy. We are committed to making discipline responsive to students' behavioral needs, fair, appropriate to the infraction, and designed to keep youth on track to graduate.

PJC supports HB 488, which would grant access to loan assistance for mental health professionals who work in Maryland public schools. Mental health professionals provide invaluable support and community to Maryland students. Research shows these supports in schools are a critical way to improve student behavior and maintain school safety.

School-Based Mental Health Services Make Students and Schools Safer

When students regularly connect with an adult whom they trust and can act in community with, they are more likely to go to that person when they are experiencing crisis and are more likely to have the supports necessary to work through issues in a healthy, non-disruptive way.¹ It is these preventative measures that do the most to increase the psychological and physical safety of students. Other states around the country are investing in "training for school and community members to identify and respond to early warning signs of mental health difficulties, and targeted prevention and intervention programs and services supporting the mental health of students . . . includ[ing] integrating mental health care delivery within school settings."²

During student crises, mental health professionals with student rapport are best situated to de-escalate a situation that may cause harm to other students and staff. "Social workers, psychologists, and counselors provide crucial direct services to students with mental health issues as well as provide expertise to teachers and principals in addressing behavior issues."³ Using these intervention decreases the use of exclusionary discipline and keeps students in schools, where they are best situated to grow and learn from their mistakes.

¹ *ISD 287's Student Safety Coaches: Summary of Literature and Staff Survey, School Year 2019-2020*, Lindsay Turner at 4. Wilder Foundation, Intermediate District 287. (Sept. 2020). <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/isd-287s-student-safety-coaches-summary-literature-and-staff>.

² *Replacing School Police with Services that Work*, Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law at 11 (Aug. 2021).

³ *Id.* at 10-11.

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Loan Forgiveness Will Increase the Number and Diversity of Mental Health Professionals in Maryland Schools to Better Meet Student Need

Loan forgiveness programs are critical for bringing in a more diverse workforce of school mental health professionals. Black college students graduate with more student loan debt than their white counterparts, making jobs with lower earning potential less viable for them.⁴ Research has shown that reducing student loan burden makes jobs like teaching more accessible to minority candidates, and we would expect the same to be true of jobs in the school mental health profession.⁵ This bill would add mental health professionals to the current student debt forgiveness program right alongside educators, which would help address a major barrier to minority participation in school mental health professions. An often-overlooked need in schools is access for non-English speaking students to mental health professionals who speak their native language.⁶ This bill will make school mental health jobs attractive to a more diverse array of professionals, including highly valuable multilingual candidates.

Maryland, like many states, is facing a shortage of school mental health professionals in schools. Experts recommend schools employ one school counselor and one social worker for every 250 students.⁷ In fact, in Maryland, there is only one school counselor for every 383 students and one social worker for every 2,324 students, nearly one tenth of the recommended number. Additionally, experts recommend schools have one school psychologist for every 500-700 students. Maryland has one for every 1,198 students.⁸

We, like the rest of Maryland families and legislators, takes school safety seriously. For this reason, it is important we take every opportunity to bolster student access to mental health services. HB 488 will enable schools to keep the mental health professionals they have now and incentivize new and better applicants in the future.

For these reasons, the PJC strongly supports House Bill 488.

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⁴ Judith Scott-Clayton and Jing Li, *Black-white disparity in student loan debt more than triples after graduation*, Brookings Institute, (Oct. 2016) (“The moment they earn their bachelor’s degrees, black college graduates owe \$7,400 more on average than their white peers (\$23,400 versus \$16,000, including non-borrowers in the averages). But over the next few years, the black-white debt gap more than triples to a whopping \$25,000. Differences in interest accrual and graduate school borrowing lead to black graduates holding nearly \$53,000 in student loan debt four years after graduation—almost twice as much as their white counterparts.”) <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-white-disparity-in-student-loan-debt-more-than-triples-after-graduation/>.

⁵ Bayliss Fiddiman, Colleen Campbell, and Lisette Partelow, *Student Debt: An Overlooked Barrier to Increasing Teacher Diversity*, Center for American Progress (July 2019) <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Teachers-of-Color-Debt-Burden--1.pdf>.

⁶ See, for example, Meghan Smith, *For immigrant students, bilingual mental health care is essential. Can schools meet the need?*, GBH News (Nov. 9, 2021) <https://www.wgbh.org/news/education/2021/11/09/for-immigrant-students-bilingual-mental-health-care-is-essential-can-schools-meet-the-need>.

⁷ Whitaker, Amir, et al. “Home | American Civil Liberties Union.” *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff Is Harming Students*, ACLU, https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/030419-acluschooldisciplinereport.pdf at 12.

⁸ Whitaker, Amir, et al. “Home | American Civil Liberties Union.” *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff Is Harming Students*, ACLU, https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/030419-acluschooldisciplinereport.pdf at 13-14.

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