

TESTIMONY: Restorative Practices Schools – Establishment

DATE: February 28, 2024

BILL: HB 1257

POSITION: Support

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means

Chair Atterbury, Vice Chair Wilkins, Honorable committee Members:

As you, many are working on numerous fronts in schools, districts, and communities to make the Blueprint a reality for all Maryland students. The Blueprint contains strategies that are excellent in several ways: Patty Centers, Judy Centers, the emphasis on tutoring for struggling students, expansion of community schools, raising standards and opportunities that enable all students to meet current graduation standards by the 10th grade, ready to accelerate academic growth and/or preparation for the workforce during the final two years of high school. Repeatedly, the Blueprint emphasizes equitable opportunities and accountability. However, despite its broad focus, the Blueprint does not address school culture explicitly.

Although strategies are promising, if they are placed in schools that do not have the appropriate school culture, the strategies will not flourish, and the desired outcomes will not be achieved. As some have put it, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Schools require climates where students feel safe and respected. Teachers and students alike must feel as though their voices are heard. Schools must become places where teachers and students want to come, and parents want to send their children. Students must feel valued and must value one another. Successful schools are based on strong sense of community maintained by and framed in positive relationships. Sadly, such essential aspects of culture do not exist sufficiently in many of Maryland’s 1,400 schools. That fact is made clear with our rates of suspension, chronic absenteeism, and teacher turnover.

While restorative practices highlighted in House Bill 1257 are highly effective in reacting to unruly behavior, the real purpose is to create an environment in which unruly behavior does not occur in schools in the first place. In education, too often we seek silver bullets. We focus too much on interventions rather than prevention and, thus, the problems we face recur over and over again. Unlike quick fixes, which predictably end in failure, restorative practices help fortify the school as a community, reinforce positive behavior and character development, as well as strengthen relationships among students and connections between students and staff. Research evidence makes clear that restorative practices accomplish these goals.

House Bill 1257 will enable all schools in Maryland to become Restorative Schools over the next 13 years. It provides the policy base and, ultimately, the funding necessary to train every principal, teacher, professional school staff member paraprofessional, bus driver and cafeteria worker in Maryland. Thirteen years is a long time, but changing a culture does not happen overnight.

I take special pride as a Marylander in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The Maryland General Assembly has embraced a vision coupled with policy and promise of funding that manifests the promise of catapulting Maryland students to a competitive position not only in the United States but in the world. In an education summit last year restorative practices schools were promoted by the Maryland State Conference NAACP. Now, I address you personally and professionally and urge you to wait no longer. Start the journey now. Support House Bill 1257.

Submitted by,
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