

KATIE FRY HESTER
Legislative District 9
Howard and Montgomery Counties

Education, Energy, and
Environment Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB 756 - Primary and Secondary Education - School Safety and Student Well-Being - Examination of Policies and Funding

February 28th, 2024

Chairman Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Energy, Education, and Environment Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 756, which seeks to holistically improve school safety and student well-being by increasing flexibility and funding in the Safe Schools Fund, adding student-centered services, and mandating guidelines on physical security in schools.

For context, over the summer, my office worked with the Center for School Safety to survey our local school systems to see how we could further school safety. We had the support of Henry Meiser, a recent high school graduate from St. Mary's County, who will share some of the research findings with you. However, the bottom line is that our local schools are struggling with inadequate funding for school safety measures and limited flexibility in fund allocation. Notably, salaries for law enforcement officers have gone up over 30% since we passed the original Safe to Learn Act in 2018, thereby requiring increased funding to meet the fiscal demand for salaries.

Therefore, Senate Bill 756 will significantly improve school safety and student well-being by increasing the flexibility and annual funding provided by the Safe to Learn Act of 2018.

Specifically, this bill will:

- Increase from \$10.6M to \$20.6M the annual allocation in the Safe Schools Fund
- Expand the flexibility of the fund so that it can be used for a wider array of services, including:
 - Hiring School Resource Officers and/or providing sufficient law enforcement coverage for schools
 - Training and resources for de-escalation and mediation services
 - Wrap-around services for behavioral health
 - Conducting emergency preparedness activities and outreach to the broader community

In addition, Senate Bill 756 requires a more formal review and analysis of security practices being applied at the local level. This includes:

- Directing the Interagency Commission (IAC), the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), and the Center for School Safety (CSS) to assess current facility security guidance, and to develop recommendations in alignment with the goals of the School Safety Advisory Board's recommendation.
- Requiring MSDE, CSS, and Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center (MLDSC) to conduct a longitudinal report to assess the impact of school safety policy measures on the rates of bullying, discipline, arrests, suicide interventions, threat assessments, overdoses, and weapons on campus.
- Completing a capacity assessment for the Center for School Safety (CSS) to ensure it has appropriate staff to meet the Center's codified functions and duties.

Increasing funding through Senate Bill 756 is pivotal for the implementation of crucial safety measures. Comprehensive assessments of school safety protocols ensure educational institutions can adapt to evolving challenges. By investing in our students' safety, we not only protect their physical well-being but also foster an environment where they can thrive academically and emotionally.

For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB 756.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Katie Fry Hester".

Senator Katie Fry Hester
Howard and Montgomery Counties