

BILL: Senate Bill 756
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education - School Safety and Student Well-Being - Examination of Policies and Funding
DATE: February 28, 2024
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment; Budget and Taxation
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports Senate Bill 756 regarding the increased commitment of the State in supporting local school system efforts to ensure school safety and student well-being. While MABE opposes repealing the provision of State funding dedicated to funding the essential services of school resource officers (SROs), MABE believes the bill’s proposal to increase funding and provide additional flexibility for local school systems is an approach worthy of pursuit.

MABE has consistently been a leading advocate for the State’s balanced approach to a statewide system of high-quality school security services, including SROs, civilian school security staff, school-based and behavioral health staff, and the role of the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS). MABE is also a strong supporter of the State’s approach, adopted in statute and regulations, to promote the equitable administration of student disciplinary actions, and the use of progressive, non-exclusionary student discipline and restorative practices to resolve student behavioral issues.

Unfortunately, even though well-established in state law, regulations, and policies, key programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, and diversionary programs are not receiving remotely enough state and local funding. Again, MABE believes the expanded scope of funding and flexibility proposed in Senate Bill 765 is a strong basis for making progress on behalf of public school students, staff, and families relying on us to do better.

MABE’s adopted legislative positions and policy statement on school safety and security issues strike a balance of advocating for funding and policy decisions at the state level and support for local school system efforts to develop and implement school safety programs and strategies based on local priorities and available resources.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all local boards of education in Maryland:

- ✓ **Supports** federal, State, and local government funding for local public school safety programs, facility upgrades, and the wide array of behavioral health and public safety services provided by other public and private entities, which are essential to maintaining safe and secure schools.
- ✓ **Supports** increased state funding to support the work of local school systems to ensure that state laws and regulations, including the Safe to Learn Act, are implemented with fidelity; and increased state and local funding for programs addressing gangs, drugs, human trafficking, behavioral health, and the impact of systemic violence in communities, schools, and our students’ lives.
- ✓ **Supports** local discretion to adopt programs and policies to ensure school safety and security.
- ✗ **Opposes** legislation which attempts to address student safety concerns by prescribing specific tools or approaches or imposes unfunded mandates on local boards of education.

Safety and security in public schools is extremely important to local boards of education for the protection of students and staff, as well as necessary to environments conducive to teaching and learning. MABE believes that safety in public schools is the joint responsibility of local boards of education, school administrators and staff, students, parents and guardians, law enforcement and other public safety agencies, human services agencies, and the community in general.

Following the tragic school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, the State Board approved reforms to require evacuation, shelter in place, lockdown and other drills that all schools must conduct each year. In 2013, with MABE's support, the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS) was created to facilitate coordination and collaboration between local school systems. Tragically, a mass school shooting occurred on Feb. 14, 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; and a school shooting occurred on March 20, 2018 at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County, Maryland. These events led to broad bipartisan support for the Safe to Learn Act of 2018, which:

- Established a School Safety Subcabinet and Advisory Board and increases funding for MCSS.
- Required school systems to designate a certified school safety coordinator and to conduct annual safety evaluations of each school;
- Required local school systems to designate a mental health services coordinator, and requires local assessment teams to intervene with students and individuals who may pose a threat to school safety;
- Required all school resource officers (SROs) and school safety and security personnel to complete a specialized curriculum in school law and restorative approaches, and requires school systems to report on schools with assigned SROs and, if not, how adequate local law enforcement will be provided; and
- Provided significant funding for school facility upgrades and school safety and security programs.

The Center for School Safety has revised and expanded the mandated training for all school security staff and SROs, and the legislature consistently invests in school safety programs and facility upgrades. In 2021, the legislature considered but did not enact bills to reform or eliminate SRO programs. However, police reform laws were enacted regarding the police officers' bill of rights, police misconduct, use of force and arrest procedures, use of body-worn cameras, and training, and impact all law enforcement officers including SROs.

In addition, Maryland law mandates local board policies on criminal gang activity, background checks and employer history reviews for employees and contractors, and emergency plans and drills to prepare for violent events and natural disasters. State law also defines educators as "persons in position of authority" and criminalizes as a fourth-degree sex offense sexual activity between educators and students above the age of consent.

MABE urges the legislature to continue to invest in the high-quality school safety programs described above and consider the input of local boards in the development of the more holistic approach to school safety and student behavior proposed in this legislation and other bills intended to ensure safe learning environments in all schools and for all students and staff.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 756 with amendments to sustain mandated funding for SROs as well as other school security staff, and the expanded types of services and evaluations proposed in the bill.