

Testimony
David W. Hornbeck
Voices for Restorative Schools
Education, Energy and Environment Committee
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Senate Bill 917 – Favorable

Mr. Chair and members of the Committee

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today and also want to thank Senator Brooks for his leadership in sponsoring the bill.

As the founder of Strong Schools Maryland, no one is a stronger supporter of the Blueprint than I. It's the best education legislation in the country in the last half century. But it reflects a glaring omission. It does not explicitly deal with school culture. It is an example of outstanding strategies. They include:

1. PreKindergarten for both 3 and 4 year olds.
2. Significant tutoring for struggling students.
3. More pay for teachers, a career ladder and greater emphasis on the professional status of teaching.
4. Recognition that all poverty is not the same by creating a strong concentration of poverty factor and entitling all schools with 55% or more low-income students to be Community Schools with greater resources.
5. Higher standards for graduation.
6. Opportunities in the last two years of high school for academic acceleration, including a two year college degree and/or standards of excellence in career tech areas that can lead to industry recognized certification.
7. And so much more, including historically unprecedented emphases on equity and systemic change.

Extraordinary!

HOWEVER, as the legendary management expert Peter Drucker observed, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast" Poor culture breeds failure; good culture in an institution results in much greater success. That's not just true of schools. It's true of businesses, law firms, churches, government, even families...all institutions. Without a change in culture, the promise of the Blueprint will fall short.

So what is the status of culture in Maryland schools. As always, look to the evidence:

1. There were 56,000 suspensions last year in Maryland. 60% of those were of Black students; 27% were students with disabilities. We feed the School to Prison Pipeline.

2. 197,000 students were chronically absent last year. That's nearly a quarter of all students. A big reason - they don't want to be in a place where they don't feel safe, where they feel disrespected; where their voices are not heard.
3. 14% of our new teachers leave before the end of their 3rd year, many more before the end of their 7th year. As with students, many teachers simply don't want to be in schools where disruption makes classroom management a major issue and where they, too, are not heard and respected.
4. One third of our middle and high schoolers report mental health challenges annually, a major issue before the pandemic, much worse now.
5. All these elements of poor school culture impact Black and Brown students disproportionately. Thus, only 34% of Black students, for example, are proficient in English/Language arts while 60% of white students are. In math, 14% of Black students are proficient; 40% of white students.

Such numbers are unacceptable, and the Blueprint will not be nearly as effective in changing them if we don't change school culture at the same time.

Fortunately, there is a research-based solution that will change school culture dramatically. It is called restorative practices. House Bill 1257 (Pasteur, hearing-Ways and Means 2/28) and Senate Bill 917 (Brooks, hearing-Education, Energy and Environment, 3/6) provide the policy base to make the changes. These two bills call for all Maryland schools to become Restorative Schools over the next 12 years, phased in parallel with the Blueprint.

A Restorative School builds community and fosters positive relationships. It is a safer school. It is one that practices and celebrates racial justice, where interactions, decisions and instruction are done with equity as a compelling priority. Staff and students value one another, listen to one another. A Restorative School is one in which the principal and the leadership team model restorative behavior.

Senate Bill 917 calls for three essential things:

1. The bills establish the Restorative School as an essential characteristic of a successful school as a matter of state policy. The Maryland State Department of Education is charged with developing a comprehensive plan in consultation with stakeholders to bring Restorative Schools to scale over twelve years.
2. They call for a restorative coach in each Restorative School. A restorative coach's primary responsibility is to work with all other staff in understanding and building the tools, mind-set, the way of life that a Restorative School reflects.
3. The bills call for the requisite training. As each school begins its transformation, ALL staff...the principal, the teachers, the bus drivers, the cafeteria workers would ALL receive at least two days of training. Refresher training would occur annually.

My testimony makes clear my support of the bill as presented. However, it would be made substantially better with the following thoughts in mind. I ask you to consider them carefully. Let's make explicit that a Restorative School is a Racially Just or Equitable School. The bills

emphasize that Restorative Schools build community, foster positive relationships and other qualities that reflect changing school climate. The bills represent a major emphasis on equity and racial justice, because you cannot truly have the qualities in a school like those described in the bill without equity and racial justice being at the fore. **HOWEVER**, race is only mentioned once. That is in the context of collecting data in a disaggregated manner. The bill does not provide that a Restorative School is a racially just school or that the qualities a restorative coach must have or develop include racially cultural competence or that the accountability outcome metrics include equity factors as indicators of being a Restorative School.

In reflecting on the bills, I believe that we should be explicit in defining the culture change we seek in a Restorative School as one that is racially just and seeks to build community and foster positive relationships in which equity is a defining principle.

There may be better ways to articulate my point; I invite you to determine even better ways to underline the important role racial justice and equity play in a Restorative School or, more importantly, characterized as any Maryland school worthy of being determined to be a successful school. However, I offer these to illustrate my point.

1. Page 2 - 7-447 (A)(4)(I) Restorative practices mean evidence based classroom and schoolwide strategies designed to strengthen relationships between individuals, build social connections within a community to foster student accountability for behavior **with special emphasis on equity.**
2. Page 5 – (6)(ii) Creating a list of training programs for school personnel to implement schoolwide restorative practices designed to strengthen and improve the school climate to promote **equitable** and positive student outcomes and conduct.
3. Page 5 – (6)(III) Monitoring and disseminating updated research regarding the most effective restorative practices and best practices on implementation and training **including racial justice and equity.**
4. Page 6 - (B)(1) The Department shall develop a comprehensive plan to implement the requirements for the establishment of restorative practices schools, considering any input provided by interested stakeholders in the state **including restorative practice experts and persons with deep understanding of racial justice and equity.**
5. Page 6 – (B)(2)(I) In conjunction with the Maryland Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports, identify persons qualified to provide initial restorative practices training to restorative practices coaches and personnel, **including cultural competence and understanding of equity and racial justice.**
6. Page 6-7 – (IV) 6. **Indicators reflecting growth in equitable practices and outcomes.**
7. Page 7 – (C)(2)(II). Receive intensive training on effective restorative practices and developing and integrating restorative practices into schoolwide daily practices and activities **that are implemented in a manner that reflect equity, racial justice and cultural competence.**

Changing culture is hard. It does not occur overnight. It requires persistence and perseverance. But it's an absolute prerequisite to achieving the goals of the Blueprint; indeed, it is crucial to

making Maryland the kind of place where we all can thrive and, as Governor Moore has called for, no one is left behind .