

Education, Energy, and the Environment
Senate Bill 917: Public Schools- Restorative Practices Schools- Establishment
DATE: March 6, 2024

POSITION: Support with Amendments

Dear Chairman,

We're here to urge your support for SB 917 to get Restorative Practices (RP) in public schools across Maryland. We are a group of Baltimore City residents and citizens, each with an education background, focused on changing the culture of schools. Research has shown that punitive forms of discipline do nothing to address children's on-going sense of responsibility to the communities of which they are part. We believe that true accountability comes from a process of understanding behavior and repairing harm, a proven result of Restorative Practices.

Though RP is already happening in some schools in Baltimore City, standards have never been established to insure fidelity to the model. There has also never been an investment in Restorative coaches that would allow for meaningful implementation, ongoing training and support, and maintenance of standards.

Though we fully support the establishment of Restorative Practices Schools, we propose the following amendments and cautions:

- As noted in the fiscal note, the funding attached to this bill will be inadequate in future years to support the RP coaches that would be needed for this work to be successful. This **RP coach position needs to be an additional position in schools**, not a duty that is added to someone else's already full plate, and they will require additional funding from the state.
- We would support **a year of planning and research that would allow the state to figure out best practices for how to best ramp this work up**.
- We hope that part of the year of planning will also be a time to **commit seriously to building the pipeline of RP coaches**. This will be key to fidelity. In the context of school staffing shortages in all areas, this needs to not be left up to chance.
- In order to manage the initiative with fidelity, **we need a parent and an RP practitioner in the Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports**. This work requires a culture shift, and those who are providing oversight, must have an understanding of the role that families play in all education change work, and the expertise of a professional who has done transformative work in schools
- We need **accountability measures that focus on ensuring fidelity to the work and not just accountability around discipline**. We believe the accountability should focus on how many circles are conducted and how many conflicts are resolved, rather than solely on a reduction in suspensions. We know that far too often schools have felt pressure to just not suspend, but without embracing the tools that allow for conflict to be an opportunity for learning and repairing harm.

The reason we feel strongly about this is that, where it has been implemented effectively, RP has been pivotal in transforming school cultures from reactive to proactive spaces. Students acquire the ability to manage conflict and maintain healthy relationships which has positive implications for their behavior in schools and out of it. They come to feel they belong to a community they are vested in, and which, in turn, is committed to their holistic growth.

Our long term goal is to help reduce the levels of violence and conflict in our City. We currently face an unconscionable number of violent deaths and untold levels of trauma. Repair of the City needs to start in schools and neighborhoods. Restorative Practices can play a critical role in this.

We anticipate that you will offer your whole-hearted support for this essential bill.

Sincerely,

Helen Atkinson, District 43A
Everette Parks, District 40
Philip Yenawine, District 40
Rebecca Yenawine, District 40