

Testimony on Maryland Senate Bill 0917 or House Bill 1257

Restorative Schools Act

POSITION: SUPPORT

Good afternoon esteemed members of the committee,

My name is Rosheda Brockington Harrell, COO of Healing City Baltimore and I am honored to stand before you today as a public health professional dedicated to the well-being of students in Maryland schools. I am here to share my insights and experiences regarding the transformative impact of restorative practices on our educational communities' social and emotional fabric. I express my strong support for bills like SB0917/HB1257, The Restorative Schools Act.

As COO of Healing City Baltimore, my primary responsibility is to coordinate sound implementation of the Healing City Act, the first trauma-responsive legislation of its kind in the U.S., making Baltimore a trauma-informed city and ensuring that every service, public servant, and policy supports healing of the community as a whole. To adequately prepare city agencies, we have proactively focused on addressing the ongoing impacts of trauma, violence, and racial inequities that plague Baltimore City residents, and equip each agency with tools to become trauma-informed and foster healing to support our youth and families. The holistic development of students, addressing their social and emotional needs, is one of our highest priorities. Within the scope of agency, training included interactive teachings on mindfulness and restorative practices centered around healing.

Restorative practices have emerged as an invaluable tool in achieving these goals, fostering a positive and inclusive environment that is conducive to the overall well-being of our students. Understanding the connection of mindfulness practices, such as meditation, breathing, and centering exercises to trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches, benefits staff and students alike. When we learn AND apply central principles of restorative practices, such as relationship/community building, using language that communicates the impact of one's behavior on another without charging shame or blame, and responding to needs, harm, and wrongdoing restoratively, we are truly uplifting principles and a foundation building on assets and strengths of our youth, growing a safe, welcoming space for students to thrive emotionally, mentally and physically.

As COO of Healing City Baltimore, I have seen firsthand how these strategies have grown, and become more impactful in shifting culture, policy, and practices that contribute to a more emotionally resilient student body. Our work includes coordination of the Baltimore City Trauma-Informed Care Task Force. We believe that restorative practices play a crucial role in addressing the emotional well-being of our youth and the collective support network of family, teachers, and school/community providers. The Baltimore City Trauma-Informed Care Task Force members are leading a campaign on restorative practices, which aims to foster learning, exchange best practices, and explore opportunities for collaboration in implementing restorative practices in each and every school.

One of the most powerful aspects of restorative practices is their impact on conflict resolution. There has been a growing recognition of the harms of exclusionary discipline policies, which address a wide range of student behaviors with suspensions and expulsions rather than more educative approaches that keep students in school. As a result, many schools have sought to replace harsh disciplinary policies with restorative approaches. Rather than relying solely on punitive measures, these practices provide a structured framework for addressing conflicts through facilitated conversations and empower students with essential conflict-resolution skills to carry into adulthood.

Our experiences with restorative practices align with the goals outlined in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. By addressing the social and emotional aspects of education, these practices contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment that is culturally relevant and truly speaks to the needs of the students we are serving.

As we've seen with the Healing City Act, legislation provides the necessary framework to ensure consistency and widespread adoption of these practices across the state. By supporting such legislation, we are taking a significant step towards prioritizing our students' social and emotional development.

I urge the committee to recognize the transformative impact restorative practices can have on the social and emotional well-being of students in Maryland. By supporting legislation in favor of restorative practices, we are investing in the emotional health and future success of every student in our state.

On behalf of our Board, CEO, staff and community supporters, thank you for all that you do to support youth and families, your time and consideration.