

Testimony
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Voices for Restorative Schools
Ways and Means Committee
February 28, 2024

House Bill 1257 – Favorable

Madam Chair and members of the Committee

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today and want to thank Delegate Pasteur for sponsoring the bill as a result of her deep experience as a restorative educator and leader in Baltimore County.

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.

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.

HB 1257 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.

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.