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Executive Nominations Committee



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**THE SENATE OF MARYLAND**  
**ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401**

**February 21, 2025**

**The Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee**  
**SB 783 – Public Schools – Student Fights – School Investigation and Discipline**  
**Statement of Support by Bill Sponsor Senator Mary Beth Carozza**

Thank you Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and my fellow members of the distinguished Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee for this opportunity to present Senate Bill 783 – Public Schools – Students Fights – School Investigation and Discipline and ask for a favorable report.

This bipartisan legislation would ask a principal or member of the school administration to investigate each student fight or physical struggle between two or more students. If a student involved in the physical altercation is found to be acting in self-defense, that student may not be disciplined. If disciplinary measures are taken before the investigation is completed, the student found acting in self-defense shall have that disciplinary action expunged from their record.

Similar legislation was introduced by Senator Carter in 2024, and to address some of the concerns raised in last year's House hearing, the bill this year has been amended to only allow school personnel to investigate each student fight or physical struggle.

In essence, this bill would end the unofficial, unfair zero-tolerance practice in some schools that treat both the aggressor and the victim in physical altercations as if they are both at equal fault. For background, zero-tolerance began with the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 and became the widespread, dominant form of school discipline following the Columbine High School massacre in 1999.

However, the overreach and arbitrary implementation of zero-tolerance policies led to their repeal across the United States. For example, the Los Angeles Unified school board were forced to roll back their zero-tolerance policies by 2014 because their approach resulted in black students being six times more likely to be arrested or given a ticket than white students. After the zero-tolerance policies were rescinded, suspensions dropped by 53% and graduation rates rose by 12%.

I want to thank the Maryland State Department of Education for taking the initiative to roll back zero-tolerance policies in the State. Following a February 2011 meeting, when a news article regarding the suicide of a student suspended under the zero-tolerance policy was circulating, the Board directed the State Superintendent to discuss the tragedy with the 24 local superintendents. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, each local board of education began to review and

revise its student discipline policies and regulations with the goal of maintaining an environment of order, safety, and discipline necessary for effective learning. This is reflected in COMAR 13A.08.01.11.

However, zero-tolerance was not specifically banned under the new regulations. This is part of the problem. For almost 20 years, zero-tolerance was so widespread that the practice of zero-tolerance, if not in name, still occurs within some schools. Students who are not at fault are still penalized for being involved in physical altercations and school officials do not conduct investigations.

This legislation is not asking the Maryland State Department of Education to change their regulations or processes. It is calling on school officials to investigate the situation before disciplinary measures are taken and the process outlined in COMAR 13A.08.01.11 is implemented.

The assumption behind zero-tolerance policies is that removing disruptive students from school will deter other students from disruption and create an improved school environment. In practice, this means that no matter how or why the rule was broken, the fact that the rule was broken is the basis for the imposition of the penalty, and regardless of intent, both or more students are removed from their educational experience. Zero-tolerance policies, official or unofficial, harms victims, scares other students into remaining bystanders, and ultimately teaches students to disassociate authority from justice.

The requirement for the principal or school administration to thoroughly investigate each student use of force incident is crucial for ensuring accountability and fairness. We cannot continue to penalize victims as if they are the aggressors. Discipline against the victim of a bully's battering for the crime of self-defense would be a great disservice not just to the victim, but to the greater mission of education.

I thank you for your kind attention and consideration, and I respectfully request a favorable report on SB 783.