
**Testimony in Opposition to Senate Bill 459
Public Schools—School Resource Officers—Firearms Required**

**Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association opposes Senate Bill 459, legislation that requires a Baltimore City school police officer and School Resource Officers across the state to carry a firearm while on school premises.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland’s public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

As educators, we believe one of our most sacred duties is to provide safe and secure public schools for every one of our children. We must do everything we can to reduce the possibility of any gunfire in schools and concentrate on ways to keep additional guns off school property and ensure the safety of children and school employees. The memories of the children and educators we have lost are a haunting reminder of the importance of keeping our schools safe. The evidence is clear, we don’t need more guns on school property, we need fewer.

In 2017, the Maryland General Assembly passed House Bill 1287, which established the Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices. They were charged with studying the current disciplinary practices being utilized in Maryland public schools and recommend best practices, particularly related to restorative approaches to student behavior and healthy school climates. In their final report¹, they discuss the issue of School Resource Officers (SROs) and the role they play in either helping or harming school climates and the role they must play in order to ensure restorative approaches are being properly implemented in schools.

“SROs can serve as mentors for students, assist with health and law-related education (e.g., drug, alcohol, and gang prevention), coach sports teams, and respond in the event of a rare emergency. But in too many schools, SROs inappropriately have become heavy-handed enforcers of basic school discipline, causing arrests of children for minor incidents that should be handled by a teacher or principal.... Given the disparities in the implementation of discipline and school-based arrests at the school level, many Commission members are concerned that the Maryland Safe to

¹<https://www.law.umaryland.edu/media/SOL/pdfs/Programs/ADR/STPP%20%20RP%20Commission%20Final%20Report.pdf> (Accessed on March 5, 2020)



Learn Act, Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 7-1508, which requires local school systems to identify either an assigned SRO or other law enforcement coverage for each school, may exacerbate these disparities. Increasing the presence of law enforcement in schools, without proper training and coordination with school personnel about the limits of their roles, could harm school climate, over criminalize adolescent behavior, and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. To the extent a school has an SRO, that officer must have explicit guidelines about his/her responsibilities, with the role clearly limited to keeping school property and the people in the school safe from serious criminal activity. These parameters must be understood by administrators and other school staff. SROs never should be involved in student discipline or behavioral control of schoolchildren.” (Page 26)

To be clear, educators have grave concerns about the conduct they are seeing and experiencing in many of their schools—conduct that can involve violent and unruly behavior between students and toward adults. Effectively dealing with these types of behaviors is the responsibility of every member of the school community. Properly trained school resource officers can be an important part of a school safety plan and a positive school environment. However, this legislation views resource officers simply through the lens of armed guards to beef up a police presence in our schools. It is of great concern to MSEA if the state were to mandate armed SROs in every school as a comprehensive solution to this issue. Notwithstanding the heroics of deputy Blaine Gaskill, the SRO at Great Mills High School whose actions helped to save lives during their 2018 school shooting, armed security personnel may mitigate the damages of school violence but often do not prevent such tragedies from happening in the first place. As the Parkland and Great Mills shootings indicate, having an armed SRO is not an effective deterrent to a student bringing a weapon to school and deciding to use it. Furthermore, an armed SRO not only fails in serving as a panacea for unruly student behavior, but he or she could potentially exacerbate the very behavior they seek to deter by unknowingly traumatizing students.

We must be careful not to bring a law enforcement reaction to the everyday happenings of a school building—in the intervening of school fights, class disruptions, or other school incidents that require immediate action. When that action is a police action, it jumpstarts the concerns raised by educators across the country about an ever-persistent school-to-prison pipeline. It is our hope to meet these daily school challenges with restorative approaches, social service supports, and other school-based interventions. **Senate Bill 459 is misguided legislation that should be rejected by the General Assembly. MSEA urges an unfavorable report.**