
MARYLAND COALITION TO REFORM SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

**Testimony for the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
SB 459 – Public Schools – School Resource Officers – Firearms Required
March 10, 2020
Position: OPPOSE**

The Maryland Coalition to Reform School Discipline (“CRSD”) brings together advocates, service providers, and concerned citizens interested in transforming school discipline practices within Maryland’s public school systems. We are committed to making discipline responsive to students’ behavioral needs, fair, appropriate to the infraction, and designed to keep youth on track to graduate. **CRSD opposes SB 459**, which requires a Baltimore City school police officer and a school resource officer to carry a firearm while present on the premises of the school to which the officer is assigned.

First, local control is a fundamental tenet in Maryland public policy. This is the idea that each jurisdiction should maintain control of the implementation of laws/policies to reflect the values and needs of its communities. The Safe to Learn Act of 2018 includes a provision that “each local school system” report high schools having assigned officers or adequate law enforcement coverage.¹ Baltimore City Public Schools (“BCPS”) has created a policing strategy, which today includes *both* armed and unarmed police officers that they deem appropriate to create the desired school environment for students that already face higher exposure to guns and violence. As the only local school system with its own dedicated police force, BCPS students experience greater police contact than any other student body across the state. The imposition of this law would only magnify that fact. Even in the wake of the traumatic incident² at Frederick Douglass High School last year (where armed officers were present) we remain concerned that: (1) increasing the presence of lethally armed police officers in public schools would serve to needlessly exacerbate the trauma experienced by many BCPS children; (2) proposed legislation is a shift away from the proven restorative approaches BCPS has adopted in its Blueprint for Success; and (3) policymakers will use the district’s limited resources to arm officers rather than prioritize needed educational and socio-emotional supports.

Arming SROs Will Unnecessarily Exacerbate Student Trauma

Nationally, there is a [lack of meaningful data](#)³ supporting the claim that arming SROs increases school safety and lowers violent crime. On the other hand, there is substantial data that shows that even one instance of police contact increases the likelihood that a young person will have further involvement with the justice system, fall behind, and/or ultimately drop-out of school.⁴ It is our understanding of current practices that SROs patrolling schools both inside and outside

¹ Maryland General Assembly, S.B. 1265, 2018, Maryland Safe to Learn Act of 2018, <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2018RS/bills/sb/sb1265E.pdf>.

² Jesse Schneiderman, *Even after shooting, Baltimore teacher doesn’t want school police armed*, Baltimore Sun, Feb. 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-op-0217-douglass-shooting-20190212-story.html>.

³ Congressional Research Service, *School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools*, 2013, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>.

⁴ Stephanie Ann Wiley, *The Amplification of Deviance Following Police Contact: An Examination of Individual and Neighborhood Factors among a Sample of Youth*, July 2, 2014, 35, <https://irl.umsl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1244&context=dissertation>.

to ensure the safety of students, as well as those who are not permanently assigned to specific schools, *can* carry their guns inside and outside school communities.⁵ For the City's young people, many of whom have been witnesses to the violence that has gripped the City, school should remain a safe, welcoming, and *comfortable* space. Even if we subscribed to the ideology that the presence of a gun somehow equals safety, it cannot be denied that a student who has seen a gun end another person's life cannot truly be comfortable in its presence. For all students, not just the ones with multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), a comfortable school setting is a prerequisite to engaging with any instructional material.

It is worth noting that City Schools SROs are under a federal consent decree, just as the rest of the City's police department. While reforms are implemented under that process it would be unwise to substantial change or bolster policing efforts.

Arming SROs Subverts the Blueprint for Success

CRSD is supportive of the intentions laid out in the BCPS *Building A Generation: City Schools' Blueprint for Success* (The Blueprint). The Blueprint's focus on Student Wholeness and Staff Leadership, in particular, support relationship-building pedagogy and the implementation of restorative approaches to discipline, which include circles, mindfulness, affective questioning, and trauma-informed care. City Schools has worked extremely hard to be a leader in alternatives to harmful disciplinary practices, and has continually touted its commitment to the whole child. Within the last year alone, BCPS has rewritten training requirements and policies for its SROs with the guiding philosophy of avoiding criminalization for its students. Although the updated policies and trainings have not been implemented long enough to be evaluated, we eagerly await details regarding the new trainings for SROs and their effectiveness. A vote for SB 459 undermines the vision of The Blueprint and the diverse stakeholders, including students and families, who supported it.

A No Vote is Fiscally Responsible

This legislation has very real categorical funding implications for BCPS, at a time when the Kirwan Commission and Maryland General Assembly leadership have decided that our students cannot afford to wait for the high quality educational resources they deserve. This type of legislation would impose mandated spending requirements on City Schools, a district that has been historically underfunded for its operational and instructional needs while simultaneously being over-scrutinized for how it stretches funds to serve its students. Supporting SB 459 is directly at odds with prioritizing the educational and overall well-being of City Schools students.

In closing, the school environment is safer when schools work to transform and maintain a positive school climate. Studies show that a positive climate is associated with lower incidents of aggression, bullying and violence.⁶ Front-end changes like investing in restorative practices

⁵ Baltimore City Public Schools, *School Police Deployment Update*, August 9, 2016, <https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/cms/lib/MD01001351/Centricity/Domain/8818/School%20Police%20Deployment%20Update2016.pdf>.

⁶ The National School Climate Council, *National School Climate Standards*, <https://www.schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/policy/school-climate-standards.pdf>; See also the Center for Social Emotional Education, *School Climate Brief* Vol. 1 No. 1, Jan. 2010, https://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/SCBrief_v1n1_Jan2010.pdf.

and better coordination with Baltimore City Police to ensure safety in communities surrounding schools is the best strategy for protecting students and staff.

For the reasons mentioned above, the **CRSD urges this committee to OPPOSE SB 459.**

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