



Olivia Bartlett, DoTheMostGood Maryland Team

COMMITTEE: Ways and Means

TESTIMONY ON: HB0496 - Primary and Secondary Education – Mental Health Services – Expansion (Counselors Not Cops Act)

POSITION: Favorable

HEARING DATE: February 3, 2021

BILL CONTACT: Delegate Wilkins

DoTheMostGood (DTMG) is a progressive grass-roots organization with more than 2500 members who live in a wide range of communities in Montgomery and Frederick Counties, from Bethesda near the DC line north to Frederick and from Poolesville east to Silver Spring and Olney. DTMG supports legislation and activities that keep its members healthy and safe in a clean environment, that support and uplift all members of our communities, and that promote equity across all of our diverse communities. DTMG strongly supports HB0496 because the well-being and success of all our children must be our highest priority, and expansion of mental health services in our schools will help achieve that goal.

All students can face problems related to learning, social relationships, making difficult decisions, or managing emotions such as depression, anxiety, worry, or isolation. The current disruption of school and normal routines caused by the coronavirus pandemic, plus non-stop news coverage of shootings, political and racial tensions, and protests, have greatly exacerbated many students' emotional distress. Some students also face addiction or gang violence in their schools. School counselors and psychologists are trained to understand how these issues affect learning, behavior, well-being, and school engagement, and they help students, their families, and their teachers understand and resolve both short-term issues and chronic problems that students may face.

School counselors and psychologists apply expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior to help students succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally, and foster the full potential of all students' academic, career, and social/emotional development. For example, the Maryland School Counselor Association currently has resources and lessons that:

- teach elementary school students that all feelings are OK and that understanding and expressing emotions appropriately can help build friendships.
- introduce elementary school students to a variety of coping skills that can help them calm down.
- provide middle school students with suggestions for managing stress and implementing self-care strategies to thrive academically and socially/emotionally during COVID-19.
- help high school students celebrate diversity by discussing cultural and racial differences that contribute to a more diverse community.

However, many schools struggle to afford adequate counselors and school psychologists. HB0496 addresses this critical need in all Maryland schools by requiring \$10,000,000 per year starting in fiscal year 2023 in the Maryland budget for the Maryland Safe Schools Fund. The money will be earmarked for grants to local school systems to increase the number of school psychologists, social

workers, counselors, and behavioral specialists in order to expand the availability of school-based mental health services and behavioral support for students. The goal is for these mental health staff to reflect the diversity of the student population in the local school system. Yearly reports to the Maryland Center for School Safety will follow up on whether the grants and the schools receiving them are achieving the desired results.

In addition, HB0496 will add needed expertise to the Maryland School Safety Subcabinet Advisory Board, including a social worker, a school counselor, a restorative approaches practitioner, a behavioral specialist, a community school coordinator, a representative from a trauma-informed school, a representative from a community mediation group, and a public school student who has experienced school-based arrest or the student's parent. This additional expertise will ensure that the Advisory Board makes more informed and equitable decisions and recommendations.

Finally, to keep all of our children safe, HB0496 further stipulates that school security officers do not have the authority to carry a firearm or arrest students.

Passage of HB0496 will help all our children thrive in school, at home, and in life. Therefore, DoTheMostGood strongly recommends a **FAVORABLE** report on HB0496.

Respectfully submitted,

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