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Senator Paul Pinsky
Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
Maryland Senate

Dear Senator Pinsky and the Committee:

I am writing in support of HB700. As an Assistant Public Defender specializing in juvenile cases, a parent and a graduate of public schools in Maryland, I have vast experience with our educational system. When I was in fifth grade at Bethesda Elementary School, my teacher explained that she was supposed to teach the class about the dangers of smoking, but she was a smoker so chose not to share the “healthy hogwash” with the class. Perhaps foreshadowing my career as a lawyer, I raised my hand and politely asked if she would consider quitting due to the high risk of lung cancer and emphysema caused by smoking. She then screamed at me and ordered me to sit in the hallway for the rest of the class. She also called my parents and demanded that they come to the school for an urgent meeting about my behavior.

If I were a student today, I may have been charged with “Disturbing School Activities.” I have represented children as young as 10-years-old in Juvenile Court in Montgomery County who were charged with “Disturbing School Activities” for arguing with teachers, pulling fire alarms, horseplay in the hallways and other typical adolescent behavior. Fortunately, we have so many better and more effective options for addressing this behavior in schools. Having a juvenile case often means that the child misses school, negatively impacting academic performance. Also, parents jeopardize their employment because they have to miss work to attend various hearings. Due to the case, the family feels less engaged in the school community. Finally, even a relatively minor charge like “Disturbing School Activities” may result in the child entering the school to prison pipeline.

Thank you for your consideration. I ask you for a favorable vote on this important legislation.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Joseph
Assistant Public Defender
Montgomery County, Maryland
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