

February 1, 2021

House Ways and Means Committee
Room 131
House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Ways and Means Committee Members:

We are writing to you and submitting this letter as written testimony in advance of your hearing on February 3 in support of HB496, Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion (Counselors Not Cops Act) a bill introduced by Delegate Wilkins.

As members of the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church and in response to our understanding of the gospel, we are active in anti-racism work including efforts to redefine public safety and transform policing. Our church has an active Committed Racial Mindfulness group and also sponsors Presbyterians for Police Transformation. We realize that the movement for racial justice requires our state to reimagine healthier uses for funds currently appropriated to police.

HB496 reappropriates the \$10 million annual School Resource Office (SRO) fund to student mental health services, wraparound supports and restorative approaches. We believe shifting these resources will have a positive effect on students.

Currently, SROs are most likely to be found in schools with higher proportions of non-white students. The crime they are most likely to arrest a student for is disorderly conduct, which is a category that includes nonviolent offenses. Arrests are often used in place of school discipline. There is significant racial disparity across the country and in Montgomery County in the rate of arrests of children of color by SROs.

Schools should be a place where children and youth receive the supportive services they need, not a place where they are started on a pipeline to prison. We therefore urge you to move this legislation forward without delay and without weakening amendments.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

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