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**BILL:** House Bill 496  
**TITLE:** Primary and Secondary Education – Mental Health Services – Expansion (Counselors Not Cops Act)  
**HEARING DATE:** February 3, 2021  
**POSITION:** OPPOSE  
**COMMITTEE:** Ways and Means Committee  
**CONTACT:** Mrs. Ardath Cade, Legislative Representative (410-991-9383)

The Board of Education of Washington County opposes House Bill 496 and urges the General Assembly to provide adequate and equitable funding for school safety as well as mental and behavioral health services.

The proposed bill eliminates mandated state funding provided in the Safe to Learn Act and replaces it with funding for enhanced school-based mental and behavioral health services for students. The bill also contains extensive reporting requirements and obligates school systems to attain specified counselor to student ratios that, while commendable, may not be possible to achieve as evidenced by the failure of similar legislation to pass in previous sessions.

In 2018, the General Assembly adopted the Safe to Learn Act, which enhances the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools and provides funds that allow schools to otherwise improve the safety of the school community. The Safe to Learn Act also contains a clear directive to develop a comprehensive training curriculum for SROs.

The state funding awarded under the Safe to Learn Act is for the purpose of enhancing school safety and the Board of Education has been able to do that for Washington County Public Schools students by being the recipient of those state funds. For example, in Fiscal Year 2019 the Board received \$79,562 that was used to hire a consultant to conduct school safety evaluations and purchase safety equipment. Additionally, funds were used to pay for SROs at extracurricular activities. In Fiscal Year 2020, the Board received \$311,113 that was used to conduct training for assistant principals to help them identify and support the implementation of effective strategies to reduce disruptive behaviors and to improve school safety, and to provide instructional materials for staff and professional development for teachers, among other things.

The state funding the Board of Education receives supplements general funds used to provide students and staff with a safe environment in which to learn and work. The proposed bill would eliminate the funding that the Board currently uses in a comprehensive manner to provide a safe school environment.

In addition to eliminating necessary funding, this bill contains extensive reporting requirements. The Blueprint for Maryland's Future, if passed, will also require extensive reporting for local school systems. Given the reporting requirements contained within the Blueprint legislation, the Board of Education respectfully requests that the General Assembly not adopt legislation that contains additional, onerous reporting requirements as complying with these requirements takes valuable time and resources away from students.

The Board of Education appreciates and values the services that both SROs and mental and behavioral health professionals provide to students. The Safe to Learn Act does not simply provide funds to put SROs in schools; it provides funding that is used to create a safe school environment. This bill, which may force school systems to prioritize providing mental health services over providing a safe school environment, is not in the best interest of our students. The Board recognizes the importance of mental health services and supports the goal of the proposed legislation: to ensure school systems have adequate funding to provide mental and behavior health services to students. However, the Board cannot support doing this at the expense of providing a safe environment for staff and students. The Board urges the General Assembly to provide additional adequate and equitable funding to local school systems to ensure they are providing mental and behavioral health services to students in addition to providing a safe and secure school environment.

We urge the committee to issue an unfavorable report on House Bill 496.

Thank you.

cc: Washington County Board of Education Members  
Washington County Delegation to the Maryland General Assembly  
Dr. Boyd J. Michael, III, Superintendent  
Dr. Peggy Pugh, Associate Superintendent for Administration and Leadership  
Dr. Gary Willow, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction  
Mr. Jeffrey Proulx, Chief Operating Officer  
Ms. Patricia Ursprung, Deputy Legal Counsel  
Mr. Steve Ganley, Safety and Security/Risk Manager  
Mr. John Woolums, Director of Governmental Relations, Maryland Association of Boards of Education