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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1089

Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and
Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police-Free Schools Act)

TO: Chair Kaiser, Vice Chair Washington, and members of the Ways & Means
Committee

FROM: Kevin Dwyer

My name is Kevin Dwyer. I live in Bethesda, in District 16, and I am a retired Montgomery County school psychologist. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB1089, Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police-Free Schools Act).

Over several decades and in a variety of middle and high schools across Montgomery County, including Montgomery Blair and Walter Johnson, I provided a full array of psychological services addressing the social-emotional, academic, behavioral, and mental health needs of students. Working with school teams, I assisted schools in addressing school discipline.

I continue to work on violence prevention and racial bias in implementing school discipline. I served as the principal investigator under the direction of the U. S. Departments of Education and Justice that produced the Federal response to school shootings happening across the nation: *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*¹. The Guide was distributed to all public schools to provide the “practical help needed to keep every child in your school out of harm’s way.” I also served as co-chair of the Montgomery County Council’s Blue Ribbon Task Force for Mental Health. That Blue Ribbon report made recommendations for preventive early interventions, for inclusion of student social skills instruction, for sustained, in-school mental health services and for positive discipline.

I am providing this testimony to urge the committee members to support

¹ Dwyer, K, Osher, D. & Warger, C.(1998) *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. Washington D.C. U.S. Department of Education.

HB1089 to fund and support proven research-based programs that support safe schools and academic success that will keep every child out of harm's way. Employing armed School Resource Officers (SROs) does not meet these goals.

Research questions the effectiveness of SROs in reducing school discipline problems. This research, summarized by Jamie Utt, (2018) found that schools with SROs had increases in exclusionary discipline for “crimes” including “minor school fights” (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). Another study found schools with SROs present showed more rather than less violence.²

Many improvements have been made in our school prevention and intervention strategies including the incorporation of positive discipline. But schools have been slow in understanding that behavior is learned and violence prevention is an educational and public health issue. Historically, most of our school discipline codes and behavioral interventions have been based on the false premise that punishment, including public ridicule, curbed misbehavior and school violence. Decades ago (1967) corporal punishment was legally administered in MCPS. We successfully legislated to outlaw that bizarre brutality. Like suspension and expulsion, corporal punishment was administered disproportionately to Black children. Suspension and expulsion continue today as failed interventions. Repeated suspensions predict dropping out. All are notoriously used with Black and Latino students at 4 to 5 times the rate compared with white students. Even for the same violations. Children with disabilities are also disproportionately disciplined and have the highest drop-out rate of all students.

The inclusion of armed police officers in the discipline of children intensifies the negative, punitive model for addressing behavior problems. Having police in the schools can be a tension-producing image of our schools and of our school community. Tension impedes learning and learning is our goal. Being greeted at the door of the school by an armed police officer tells students, families and visitors that this is a ‘dangerous’ school where safety is dependent upon police presence. Yet, “an effective and safe school is the vital center of every community.”³

HB 1089 would provide funding for schools to implement effective, research-based interventions for addressing school discipline such as social workers and restorative

² Devlin, D.N. & Gottfredson, D.C. (2018) The roles of police officers in schools: *Youth violence & juvenile justice*, 16 (2), (208-223).

³ Ibid.

justice programs. As noted above, SROs are not among those proven interventions. It is not a proven program.

Meeting the mental, social, and learning needs of students improves behavior and academic achievement. Counseling works as an alternative to in-school suspension. Teaching and coaching and monitoring all staff in the use of de-escalation techniques works as does teaching social skills from the earliest, preschool years.

Decades ago, the Good Behavior Game, a research proven intervention, was used with “troubled” first grade students. Those students were followed to adulthood and that intervention was shown to reduce those youth from entering the justice system when compared to matched peers.

We need to recognize that some youth come to school having experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACES) that leave them traumatized. Anger, defiance, distrust can result from ACES. Caring connections with school staff can reduce the negative impact of ACES. Classrooms can be more resilient when staff are addressing those needs.

We must ask the question: what works in improving school discipline and safety? And we must spend our resources on the practices proven to support students, rather than practices proven to lead to the school-to-prison pipeline. An effective and safe school is a vital center of every community, so I ask you to support HBI089 and support the removal of armed law enforcement officers from our schools.

Kevin Dwyer, MA, NCSP

Kevin Dwyer is a past president of the National Association of School Psychologists and Life-time Achievement Award Recipient