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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: Quinn Spence

My name is Quinn Spence, I'm a senior at Einstein High School, and I live in District 19. I'm providing 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).

When I first entered high school, I didn't see anything wrong with the fact that we had an armed police officer on campus during school hours. It was telling of my privilege that for the first couple of years I spent in school, I didn't think much of the police car parked in front of the school all day. I understood police officers to be a threat to people of color, people with disabilities and mental health issues, and an overall threat to the wellbeing of many of my peers. Recently, though, I came to learn about the reality of the SRO program.

Constitutionally, SROs have no legal duty to protect the students they serve, as confirmed by the trial of the police officer stationed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School -- whose school shooting catalyzed the State's Safe to Learn Act -- and was caught on camera fleeing campus during the Parkland shooting.

There is no national, statewide, or local data confirming that officers keep us safe in schools. Montgomery County's own Office of Legislative Oversight states that studies 'have not found conclusive evidence that the presence of school based law enforcement has prevented school shootings or had a positive effect on students' perceptions of school safety.'¹

But data does confirm that students in schools with police officers are five times more likely to

¹ "Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) Impact Statement Bill 46-20," pp 2, <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Resources/Files/resjis/2020/RESJ-Bill46-20.pdf>.

be arrested on campus than their counterparts in police-free schools.² Student behavior, typical of many teens, such as drug use and truancy becomes criminalized when law enforcement officers are stationed at schools. In fact, research shows that Black students feel *less* safe with police presence in schools.³ The SRO at my high school was casually involved in classroom activities, and even played in the school band with no regard for the distress of students of color who were forced to share a classroom environment with an armed officer, handcuffs at his waist, equipped with a bulletproof vest.

Maryland state spends millions on the SRO program every year, yet we know alternative student support programs are more successful to actively intervene in and improve the lives of students. Data shows that the most successful responses are handled by a professional counselor, advisor, or social worker.⁴ Alternatives to policing, such as trauma-informed therapy and counseling, restorative justice programs, and community building and support programs improve the health and quality of students' lives, building trust and relationships rather than a sense of fear.

I am set to graduate from MCPS this June, and I want to be proud of the school that I leave behind. I want the future of my school and all Maryland schools to be one that prioritizes student safety and health, not the school-to-prison pipeline. I want students to be able to grow and learn from their mistakes, rather than being thrown in jail. I want our community to be safe, encourage growth, and prioritize student needs over the illusion of safety and reality of carceral trauma created and upheld by police in schools.

As such, I respectfully urge this committee to support HBI089 - the Police Free Schools Act.

Respectfully,
Quinn Spence

² Theriot, Matthew (2009) School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior. Available at: <http://youthjusticenc.org/download/education-justice/school-policingsecurity/School%20Resource%20Of%EF%AC%81cers%20and%20the%20Criminalization%20of%20Student%20Behavior.pdf>

³ Chris Curran et al., The Good Guy Image Police Present to Students Often Clashes with Students' Reality (June 5, 2020), <https://theconversation.com/the-good-guy-image-police-present-to-students-often-clashes-with-students-reality-13982>

⁴ Dignity in Schools Campaign, A Resource Guide on Counselors Not Cops (2016), http://www.dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Resource_Guide-on-CNC-I.pdf