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Maryland General Assembly  
Attn: House Ways & Means  
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Opposition to H.B. 1089

Dear Committee Members:

Just three years ago, your body determined that School Resource Officers were necessary in all schools and enacted the Maryland Safe to Learn Act of 2018. Since that time, I have witnessed numerous interactions between the students and officers in the Garrett County Public Schools. Some of these include humor, teasing, using nicknames they've developed for each other, etc. Other times, it's been an officer telling students to "settle down" and they say, "yes, sir" and comply.

Students approach the officers to report concerns about the physical and mental well-being of their classmates, knowing that this is a person they can trust to take action and maintain their confidence. Officers don't only work the regular school day, but they are visible at sports and other competitive events; they attend dances and after-prom parties; and they monitor police investigations to report "handle with care" events to school administrators. More recently, SROs have done well-being checks on many students who haven't been participating in virtual school.

Yes, there are times when the SRO has to conduct a criminal investigation. Isn't it a better use of time and resources for the officer to figure out who stole a cellphone from a gym locker, have it returned and speak to the parents of all involved than to have the school administrators interrupt their business of education to handle this? Very seldom are these events referred to the Department of Juvenile Services for action. Those who are referred are usually repeat offenders or those who have committed a serious crime that endangered another student or staff member. These last cases would have come into the juvenile system anyway, as, before the advent of the SRO program, the victim or parent/s of the victim would file a complaint with DJS.

I read with incredulity the proposition that SROs negatively impact students with disabilities. Garrett County SROs are also the parents of children/young adults with disabilities or special needs and are very effective at interacting with that population. While monitoring student behavior in the schools, they know which students are more vulnerable to being victims of harassment and bullying by other students and are known to keep an eye out for them.

Finally, I have to address what instigated the original legislation – “school shooting” events. I have to believe that the presence of the officers provides a deterrent effect for those who would come to school properties to cause harm to students or staff. The SROs keep their fingers on the pulse of their schools and know when a staff member has obtained a protective order against a significant other. They quickly respond to the “suspicious vehicle in the parking lot” complaints and provide a great sense of security to the persons in all of our school buildings.

This letter is to submit my opposition to H.B. 1089, the Police-Free Schools Act. We can't know how many persons who would have caused harm to school students or staff were deterred by these officers, but we know that these events have declined everywhere. There can be no justification for passing this bill.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Lisa Thayer Welch