

HB 496
Primary and Secondary Education – Mental Health Services – Expansion
(Counselors Not Cops Act)
Ways and Means Committee
February 3, 2021

TESTIMONY OF ARETHA DORSEY

POSITION: SUPPORT

I am the mother of a 17 year old son, Jevante Dozier, who is now a senior in Kent County High School. I support HB 496, which takes money out of the school police program and puts it into student mental health and behavior services.

I want to tell you a story about my son that explains why I believe that police make school less safe for children, especially Black children. When Jevante was in 10th grade, he found himself in an ongoing dispute with another boy at school. He and the boy had had a few verbal encounters, and tensions were rising. Jevante told the principal what was going on, and I also asked the principal several times for help. The principal said several times that he would address the situation, and we believed that he would, only to find out later that he had not and that we were not even given the bullying report form we should have received. It felt like we made as much effort as we could to solve and prevent problems, and we trusted the school to do its part but it did not.

One day in the cafeteria, things boiled over. The boy confronted Jevante, cussing, yelling, and clapping loudly. When the boy lunged at him in his face, Javonte couldn't take it any more, and he fought back. They both hit each other, and the fight lasted for maybe 30 seconds before the school staff broke it up. Neither Javonte nor the other boy got any serious injuries.

Jevante was suspended for three days, and the School Resource Officer arrested and referred him to the Department of Juvenile Services for second degree assault and "disturbing school activities or personnel." It was very stressful. I didn't believe that the information in the police report was accurate, but I didn't know what to do about it. Jevante had to miss school, and I had to miss work, to go to a DJS interview. We knew that it was a possibility that Javonte might need to go to court or even get locked up. We answered a lot of questions about Jevante and our family, and Jevante had to explain how he would avoid getting in trouble again – even though he had tried to avoid trouble before this incident by going to the principal. Eventually, DJS told us they would close the case, but it felt like we just got lucky; if we got another officer, Javonte might have had a worse outcome. And even with the case closed, we knew that he had a record, and would get a harsher penalty if he got in any kind of trouble again. Bottom line is that he should not have been arrested or sent to DJS at all.

After this experience, I felt like school was not a safe place for Javonte. I worried he might get arrested or harassed by the police even if he made any other small mistake, as all kids do. And I felt his race was a factor as well, especially since there was an incident that same year when a white girl slapped Javonte, and KCPS sent him to the alternative school for a day even though he had just walked away.

Imagine if Jevante's school had more staff who could mediate conflict before it turned into a fight, or professionals who could help kids who were struggling with anger or other issues. I actually believe the boy that had been harassing Javonte probably needed some counseling or other help – and if he got it, none of this would have happened. Please vote for HB 496 so school can be safe for children like my son.