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**BILL:** House Bill 1089  
**TITLE:** Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police-Free Schools Act)  
**HEARING DATE:** March 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 1089 and urges the General Assembly to continue to allow local control over the use of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools and to provide adequate and equitable funding for school safety as well as mental and behavioral health services.

The proposed bill eliminates a local school system’s ability to contract with a city, county or state law enforcement agency to provide SRO services and seeks to replace SROs with school security employees. It also eliminates mandated state funding provided in the Safe to Learn Act that can be used to promote a safe school environment 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 SROs in schools and provides funds that allow schools to otherwise improve the safety of the school community.

The Board of Education of Washington County appreciates and values all of the services that SROs provide to students, not just the security services. Washington County’s SROs de-escalate situations on campus involving students and, at times, parents. They have constructive interactions with students through a mentoring program at our alternative school and Morning Greeting programs at several schools, both of which have resulted in established, positive relationships between SROs and students. A positive relationship built between an SRO and a student is long term, and the relationship helps schools to be proactive instead of reactive to situations involving a student.

SROs in Washington County resolve issues through conflict resolution and restorative practice platforms designed to accomplish a positive outcome. They are the recipients of a grant for a pre-arrest diversion program, with the goal of changing negative behavior without using the courts.

Local control should be retained because the relationship between a local school system and its SROs varies across the state, with some, like Washington County, having a positive relationship. The Board of Education would like to continue its relationship with local law enforcement because Washington County SROs provide the added benefit of helping school staff maintain a positive school climate in addition to providing a safe and secure learning environment for students.

The safe and secure learning environment the Board of Education has been able to provide its students is due in part to state funding awarded under the Safe to Learn Act, the purpose of which is to enhance school safety. 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. 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, 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 also requires 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 Board acknowledges 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 also recognizes the important role of SROs in our schools and cannot support an increase in mental and behavioral health services at the expense of providing a safe environment for staff and 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 urges the General Assembly to continue to allow local school systems to have local control over SROs in schools and 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 1089.

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