

To: Maryland General Assembly, House Ways & Means Committee
From: Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie- Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality
Re: HB 1089 Police-Free Schools Act
Hearing Date: March 3, 2021

Dear Members,

I write to you today wearing a few hats- mother, teacher, and advocate. I am asking for a favorable report on HB 1089 because we need smart, therapeutic solutions to school safety.

My son has an IEP and a 504 Plan. As a tall Black 15-year old on the autism spectrum, it worries me every day that he is at an exponentially higher risk for being arrested by an SRO than his white, neurotypical peers. Statewide, special education students make up 12% of the population but 23% of the students arrested by SRO's. In my county, Charles, Black students make up 50% of the population, but are 87% of the arrests, largely because their behaviors are viewed as criminal.

My organization, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality, has a court watch program. We have observed that children as young as 11, almost exclusively Black boys, are being arrested for simple infractions such as "being disruptive," skipping class, walking the hallways, and stealing a food item from the cafeteria.

Our organization supports this bill because it funds the services our children REALLY need to be safe, which is a trauma-informed school, wraparound services, and more support staff. As a legislator, you must not lead out of fear. You must make laws that lead our state into the future wisely and set our schools up for the long-term safety and well-being of our students. HB 1089 is the comprehensive legislation that can make that happen.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ongisa', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie
Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality