



*Many struggles, one mission.*

## Testimony SUPPORTING HB0496

February 1, 2021

Dear members of the Ways & Means Committee,

My name is Abby Cocke and I am a resident of Baltimore City in District 43 and a strong supporter of HB0496. On behalf of Baltimore for Border Justice, a local advocacy and aid organization, I am submitting this testimony to urge you to SUPPORT HB0496, *Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion (Counselors Not Cops Act)*.

More than 3,000 students in the state of Maryland were arrested at school in the 2018-2019 school year. Ninth graders had the highest number of arrests – 13 and 14 year olds. The vast majority of arrests were for fistfights without weapons, of the kind kids have (unfortunately) engaged in since time immemorial. As a state, we spend a whopping \$10,000,000 per year on policing public schools. Meanwhile, many lack a nurse or a psychologist. What message does it send when we show our kids that we believe they deserve to be constantly surveilled and subject to arrest, but don't deserve to be cared for? Moreover, what concrete damage does it do?

When we commit our children into the hands of the public school system, it is with the hope that they will come out stronger, smarter, more empathetic, and more prepared to live fulfilling lives. Instead, for too many students, particularly students of color, school is the on-ramp to America's mass incarceration machine. In Maryland, Black students account for 56% of school-based arrests despite making up only a third of the school population and being no more likely than their peers to misbehave. Disabled students are also disproportionately likely to be among those arrested. In Baltimore City, students have numerous stories of being targeted and harassed by "School Resource Officers" and of being arrested on false charges. In 2017, an officer at REACH! High School in Baltimore was caught on tape slapping a student three times in a row and kicking him after claiming that the 16-year old spit on him. The altercation began because the officer accused the student of trespassing and tried to escort him off campus – when in fact, he was enrolled at the school. Evidence shows that being treated with distrust actually causes student behavior to worsen in response. And no evidence has shown that school police actually make schools or students safer, nor has any group identified a psychological benefit to having police in schools.

We can and must break this cycle. Instead of criminalizing our kids, we have an amazing opportunity to redirect these funds to support them by equipping their schools with mental health workers, social workers, community school coordinators, and other programs and services. We have strategies that are proven to work in aiding our young people's development – let's invest in those, rather than in a strategy that has proven itself a failure.

Thank you for your attention and for doing the right thing.

Sincerely,

Abby Cocke  
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