

Testimony for the House Ways & Means Committee

March 3, 2021

**HB 1089– Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services
and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police–Free Schools Act)**

FAVORABLE

To Chair Kaiser, Vice Chair Washington, and honorable Committee members,

My name is Onyinye Alheri, a resident in Maryland’s 40th Legislative district and graduate student at the UMB School of Social Work. I am writing to urge the House Ways and Means Committee to issue a favorable report on HB1089 and eliminate the presence of school resource officers (SROs) in Baltimore and across Maryland.

There is no scientific or empirical evidence that SROs make schools safer, though there is plenty which demonstrates that they disproportionately harm Black & Latinx students and students with disabilities.

As a former Baltimore City Public School student, I can recall the times my schools had no heat, no A/C, no calculators, books that were falling apart, poor quality food, and bathrooms that were out of service. There were even times where we had no teachers, so that substitutes would run back and forth between classes to put movies on for us. When we complained we were always told there was no money. Yet there was always enough for police and surveillance systems. How do you think this made us feel? What kind of learning environment do you think this generated?

Baltimore City School Police consistently overspend their budget and contribute to the school-to-prison/deportation pipeline by draining resources which they use to punish and criminalize students. Our youth deserve better. In this time of virtual learning, it is especially ridiculous to dedicate funding to school resource officers, especially when many students are at home lacking adequate internet and computer access.

School funds are better spent hiring mental health providers (clinicians, counselors, social workers and psychologists), mediators and restorative justice practitioners who collaborate with educators, caregivers and students to create a safe school environment based on respect, healing and trust.

Students face enough challenges in school and in their communities. Criminalizing them will only further harm them, perpetuating the very cycles of violence that school police claim to, but fail to, address. Several other US states and cities (including Oakland, Minneapolis, Connecticut, Oregon, Massachusetts and others) recognize this and have eliminated school police in their districts. It is time for Maryland to catch up and create learning environments that are truly safe and supportive so that our young people can thrive.

A special “thank you” to Delegate Acevero for your transformative work to achieve true justice and safety for our students.

#CounselorsNotCops
#Police-Free Schools

Best,

Onyinye Alheri
oyalheri@pm.me