

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

TESTIMONY OF JANNA PARKER

POSITION: SUPPORT

I am a former teacher in Prince George’s County Public Schools, and I have dedicated the last several years to advocating for equity in education, police accountability, and racial justice in Prince George’s County and throughout Maryland. **I support HB 496, which would redirect \$10 million in state funds from School Resource Officers towards school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, community school coordinators, and other professionals that can provide our students the services they need to be safe and successful.** With my testimony, I want to address and correct some common misconceptions I have heard about school police.

Myth: “School resource officers” are different from police.

Despite their euphemistic name, “school resource officers” are police. They work for the police department (in every County except Baltimore City – where they are employed by the school district), they carry firearms, and they have the power and obligation to make arrests. Although some may spend a small portion of their time on educational activities, they are not primarily “D.A.R.E.” instructors, as some believe. Their central function – reflected in district-police department memoranda of understanding – is to enforce the law. This means that they have the authority and duty to arrest children for any behavior that could be viewed as a crime – including fighting and being disruptive. In fact, most school-based arrests in Maryland are by school resource officers and are for these types of low-level childhood behaviors.¹

Myth: We need to keep police officers in schools to mentor students.

Individually, some school police officers may serve as mentors to some students, although in general school police officers spend only a minority of their time on mentoring activities.² But even when a school police officer does play a mentoring role, the officer’s primary job is still to enforce the law, which could include arresting even those students with whom the officer has a mentoring relationship. Students seeking a police officer mentor are free to seek out those opportunities in the community – for example, by attending police department neighborhood events which, unlike school, recruit participants on a voluntary basis only. The possible desire of some students to develop a mentoring bond with an officer does not justify subjecting all students to regular police presence in their schools and the harms that come with that, particularly for students of color and students with disabilities.

¹ Maryland State Dep’t of Education, Maryland Public Schools School-Based Arrest Data 2018-19

² Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, Webinar: Cross-Sector Collaboration for Police-Free Schools (2020), <http://hmprg.org/events/webinar-cross-sector-collaboration-for-police-free-schools/>.

Myth: We need police in schools so that youth develop trust in law enforcement and to improve police-community relationships.

The function of public education is to teach students – not to mend relationships between police and communities. Many children of color have a well-grounded fear of law-enforcement – based on the experiences they have had in their neighborhoods, and brutality they have witnessed on TV or the internet, including the killing of Black people by officers and the separation of immigrant families by ICE agents. Putting SROs in schools does not help these children to develop fond feelings for police; instead, seeing officers in the hallway often distracts and traumatizes, undermining children’s ability to learn.³

Myth: School police effectively serve as student counselors and social workers

Counselors and social workers receive years of training and certification in a range of topics relevant to child development, student mental health and social/emotional well-being, and behavior. School police receive only a one-week training on de-escalation, disability awareness, maintaining a positive school climate, constructive interactions with students, and implicit bias and diversity awareness.⁴ This limited training does not qualify officers to provide students with mental health or case management services. The most effective way for school districts to provide students with counseling and social work students is to hire sufficient numbers of school counselors and social workers.

Myth: Police presence keeps schools safe.

Police presence has not been shown to stop school shootings or to make schools safer in any way.⁵ Instead, by funneling students into a pipeline towards prison when they make childhood mistakes, police presence actually makes schools less safe. Supporting students with mental health services and social-emotional skills development is a much more effective – and less harmful – way to improve student behavior and keep schools safe.

HB496 recognizes these realities by redirecting state funds away from SROs and towards student mental health services, wraparound supports, and restorative approaches, which actually make schools safer. For these reasons, I urge a favorable report on this legislation.

For questions, please contact me at msjannaparker@gmail.com.

³ Chris Curran et al, The Good Guy Image Police Present to Students Often Clashes with Students’ Reality, The Conversation (June 5, 2020), <https://theconversation.com/the-good-guy-image-police-present-to-students-often-clashes-with-students-reality-139821>

⁴ Md. Code Ann., Educ. 7-1508(b); COMAR 14.40.04.03.

⁵ National Public Radio, Why There’s a Push to Get Police Out of Schools, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/23/881608999/why-theres-a-push-to-get-police-out-of-schools> (June 23, 2020)