

March 1, 2021

Maryland General Assembly
Attn: House Ways & Means
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Opposition to H.B. 1089

Dear Committee Members:

As a parent, the safety and well being of my children are always at the forefront of my mind. With the threat of school shootings an unfortunate reality, I have a constant desire to be near my children to protect them from such an unfortunate event. I'm sure I speak for millions of other parents of school-aged children when I say, although it doesn't eliminate the worry, I feel a great sense of calm knowing that most schools have a uniform, trained marksman on site for the sole purpose of deterring and/or eliminating such a threat should it occur.

As a Deputy Sheriff assigned to work as the School Resource Officer in my daughter's school, I'm extremely blessed to be able to fulfill my desire of being near my daughter and to be able to react quickly to such an act of violence should it happen. I proudly perform my duties and act on behalf of the other 1,700 parents in this school who can't be here with their children. Their children are my children and I vow to make every effort to ensure they are provided a safe environment, free from harm, so that they may learn without fear of violence, and I think of them as my own.

To that note, it simultaneously saddens and sickens me to read the proposed legislation in which you wish to eradicate from school grounds the existence of these children's sole line of defense. Your proposals that [paraphrased] "...a local school system may not contract with a law enforcement agency to station law enforcement officers in schools or on school grounds..." and "...a local school system may not establish its own police force..." are emphatically stating that you are in absolute acknowledgement and in favor of increased response times to incidents of violence at schools. Statistics show that these incidents are normally over in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. How can you ever begin to believe that removing SROs will keep students safe, or make them safer?

Your proposal to replace SROs with unarmed, non-sworn, "School security employees" is an optical gesture at best and is not a replacement for trained law enforcement. A trained school security employee has no more authority to act in any situation than any classroom teacher...less in fact. And school administrators have more authority than sworn police to act in some situations where the Fourth Amendment comes into play. Not to mention schools have trained restraint teams who are taught to handle kids who are unruly and posing a threat to themselves or others, where police typically are not trained in these specialized holds. But what happens when these techniques fail and safety is suddenly a factor? They call the police.

In addition, your proposal for school districts to assemble an advisory board for the purpose of developing “..a specialized curriculum for use in training of school security employees “...which shall include training on “...de-escalation, disability awareness, maintaining a positive school climate, constructive interactions with students, and implicit bias and disability and diversity awareness with specific attention to racial and ethnic disparities...” is rather redundant as well. Most agencies in Maryland have already been sending their SROs to “specialized training” in which all of this is covered. In fact, the manual issued to SROs from this training program was written by Bernard James and Dr. Janet Nease. Bernard specializes in Civil Rights, Constitutional Law, and Education Law. Nease spent 34 years in public education and is now a curriculum consultant. Don’t reinvent the wheel. When you have time, please look at this publication, “To Protect & Educate” from the National Association of School Resource Officers, I believe you’ll be surprised on how SROs are trained to perform in schools.

The only part of this proposed bill that I support is the addition of additional mental health counselors and psychologists in schools. Whether you choose to believe it or not, we occasionally work hand in hand with the same students in many cases. SROs are already part of the “wraparound services” and “restorative approaches” you desire, no matter what you may think of the perception of our roles. Although these are not the primary roles of the SRO, we are part of that system and play an important role in assisting the entire circle. But to deprive the students and teachers of the SROs true primary role and responsibility would be a great disservice to all in the state of Maryland. Not only would you be taking away a deterrence and a line of defense, you would also be taking away a resource available to them that has built trust, rapport, and relationships with those who need it most. Let us continue to be a positive force with them in the school and community.

I oppose H.B. 1089.

Sincerely,

Joseph M. Casey Jr.

Joseph M. Casey, Jr