

HB 1089 – Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police Free Schools Act)
Hearing before the House Ways and Means Committee
March 3, 2021

Testimony of Neha Singhal

Position: SUPPORT

Good afternoon, my name is Neha Singhal and I am a high school teacher in Montgomery County, testifying today as an individual to support Bill 1089.

I can tell you firsthand, from witnessing a student arrested in school and the negative impact it had on that student, their family, and their peers, that having police in schools is not developmentally appropriate. When police are involved, young people are not given the chances they need and deserve to practice conflict management skills and learn how to manage their emotions in a healthy way. Policing is and always will be a punitive measure, serving the interest of a criminal (in)justice system rather than the needs of a developing mind.

Moreover, we also know that SRO presence and broader police involvement isn't always about students' actions but instead about unwarranted adult fears steeped in implicit biases, which lead to disproportionate surveillance & arrests based on race and disability. Rather than saying the statistics proving that arrests perpetuate racism, take for example the case just last year in Montgomery County, where a [5 year old child](#) walked out of school. Rather than having caring trauma-informed trained adults going to look for him and get him to safety, the police were called. This boy was traumatized for almost 1 hour as police told him things like "you should be beaten." You might think this is an isolated incident that only happened because these were "beat cops" and not SROs but I urge you to listen carefully to the multitude of Black & Latinx [student testimonies](#) who are speaking of harm they have faced by SROs in schools despite this false idea that their mission is one of 'building relationships'.

In order to address this type of structural racism, removing SROs is an urgent step that will stop giving school staff an easy default of getting police involved. Instead, I urge you to strengthen our professional ability as school staff to proactively address & resolve conflict by voting to support this bill that will fund mental health services, more counselors, and more restorative justice training. I have attended many trainings over the years to build my capacity on student-centered practices and just one of many examples to show it's possible for school staff to prevent conflict is when I noticed a few students talking about wanting to fight someone because of missing headphones. I felt no need to involve police and instead believed in my trained ability to talk with these girls to de-escalate and take them to a trusted counselor who helped them figure out how to resolve the situation. These students only ended up missing 1 class rather than the more severe academic disruption that happens when SROs are involved. We must remove SROs AND fund mental health services. We need both to best support our students.

I want to end by noting that I am just one of [200+ teachers, counselors, and administrators in Montgomery County who have signed a letter](#) to elevate our students' concerns about the SRO

program and echo their call for removal. All of us educators did not take this issue lightly when signing onto this letter but believe strongly in heeding the call when young people are sounding the alarm that something is deeply unjust. Please, delegates, allow us educators to do our jobs and support a child's journey to learning healthy behaviors without the involvement of police. Thank you for your time.