

**Testimony for the House Ways and Means Committee
February 3, 2021**

**HB 496 - Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion
(Counselors Not Cops Act)**

FAVORABLE

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

My name is Sallie Holmes and I live in Silver Spring, Maryland. I submit this testimony as a concerned Maryland citizen and mother of two graduates of Maryland Public Schools.

Other individuals and organizations have provided personal experience and data reinforcing that having School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools adversely and disproportionately impacts students of color and perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline, while doing nothing to make students and schools safer. I find those experiences and data too powerful, shocking and compelling not to act.

My comments are based on many years of service as a social worker and therapist in schools in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties and Washington, DC. All three jurisdictions share an egregious deficiency of student support services such as nurses, mental health practitioners, social workers, counselors, and specialists trained in trauma and restorative justice practices.

The children I worked with, mainly Black and Latino, seldom failed to impress me. Most had experienced adverse childhood experiences such as abuse or neglect, being a witness to death or violence in the home or community, homelessness or food insecurity, living in a home with substance misuse, mental health problems, or other circumstances that undermine a child's sense of security, stability and belonging. Additionally, children in immigrant households often experience anxiety associated with ICE agents and other authorities, including police.

Just one of these traumas can lead to chronic health and behavioral issues, while most of my students had faced multiple adverse childhood experiences. And yet they worked hard to develop coping mechanisms, do well in school, keep a sense of humor and look towards the future with optimism. For me, many of those children are the personification of resilience. Nonetheless, they were, as research shows, at high risk of attention deficits, emotional dysregulation, and oppositional behaviors, and also of impact brain development affecting decision-making and self-regulatory skills. And most lacked the mental health supports they needed and were entitled to in order to succeed.

Mental health professionals know that prevention, not policing is the best way to protect our students and promote a healthy, stable and safe learning environment. Instead, for many of these children, walking past police cars at the school's front door and passing armed officers in the hallways trigger past traumas, erodes their sense of safety, and makes it more difficult to focus on learning. Moreover, they are acutely aware of the numerous, graphic, tragic and indisputable examples of police violence and killings that have been in the news and on social media in recent months. How then can it not be intimidating for a student of color to see a gun-carrying police officer in school?

From my experience, school security guards play numerous supporting roles in the schools and build strong relationships with the children. By contrast, armed officers do not. Police are not therapists and they are not counselors. My sense is that SROs are in schools not to make the students feel safer, but

rather to make the administrators and adults feel safer. Their jobs are more about student control than student safety and well-being.

If Maryland is serious about strengthening student safety and academic performance, and I believe it is, then we need to get police out of our schools and greatly increase our investments in the other proven, more effective and less harmful approaches to school safety mentioned above. Rather than merely tweaking the current program, I strongly urge the Maryland General Assembly to remove armed police from our schools, and also appropriate additional funding for mental health and other student support services.

Respectfully submitted,

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