

March 3, 2021

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1089

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

TO: Chair Kaiser, Vice Chair Washington, and members of the Ways & Means Committee
FROM: Kate Sugarman

My name is Kate Sugarman, and I live in District 15. I am testifying in support of HB1089, Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police-Free Schools Act). Thank you to Delegate Acevero for introducing this bill.

I have been working as a public health physician for many decades, for my entire professional career. All of the patients I see are low income, and almost all are families of color, either Black or Latinx. Many of these families are immigrants.

Unfortunately, I see firsthand what happens when youth are apprehended by police rather than given the social services and mental health care that they desperately need.

Our nations' schools have become one of the key feeders of a disproportionate number of youth of color into the juvenile justice system. The school-to-prison pipeline is exacerbated by the growing number of police officers stationed in schools, in programs such as the School Resource Officer (SRO) program present in counties throughout the state.¹

We can and must do better for our children. Having police officers stationed in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon, not a practice written in stone. I grew up without a police presence in my entire education in Baltimore City public schools, as I'm sure many of you did as well. My principal, school counselors, and teachers served as educators in all senses of the word - meaning teaching students how to learn in a way that included how to behave appropriately. We can successfully return to that model, which resulted in far less criminalization of childhood conduct, if we look for a more holistic way to support our students.

There is a Jewish teaching that whoever saves a life, saves the world. I urge you to act to protect many children's futures by supporting HB1089 and removing school resource officers in schools. Thank you.

¹ Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices, Final Report and Collaborative Action Plan (2018), <https://www.law.umaryland.edu/media/SOL/pdfs/Programs/ADR/STPP%20%20RP%20Commission%20Final%20Report.pdf>