

March 3, 2021

Phyllis K. Lerner
Bethesda, MD 20815

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: Phyllis Lerner

My name is Phyllis Lerner, I live in District 16, and I am providing this testimony in support of HB1089, Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police–Free Schools Act).

Most of us did not grow up with police patrolling the hallways of our schools. Starting in 2002, federal incentives led to stationing police officers inside schools. As recently as 2014, Montgomery County, just one of the many school districts in our state that deploys armed law enforcement officers to schools only had 6 police officers in schools. Today, MCPS has 26 school resource officers (SROs), one in each high school, in addition to MCPS' 249 security staff. However, no national or Maryland study has found that SROs decrease school violence.¹ This is not a Montgomery County specific issue either- SRO expansion has happened across the state and Maryland now has the largest population of incarcerated young black men between the ages of 18-24 in the nation.²

While evidence that SRO's decrease violence is extremely difficult to find, there is ample research that shows alternative support programs, like trauma-informed care, increased mental health supports, and alternative justice programs create safer schools and a more welcoming school climate.

Jewish tradition teaches, "Direct your children onto the *right path*, and when they are older, they will not leave it" (Proverbs 22:6). This state has already identified racial disparities in arrests when SROs are in our schools. Whether it's a student who instigates a hallway fight, or the bystanders, seeing their friend handcuffed, neither will guide our children onto the "right path."

¹ Kupchik, A. (2019) *Research on the impact of school policing*.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yXBHTRHRRy0VaPm7zcLi1PL04rcpnou/view>

² Justice Policy Institute. (2021) *Rethinking Approaches to Over Incarceration of Black Young Adults in Maryland*
http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/12702?utm_source=%2fMarylandYoungAdult&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=redirect

More than 25 years ago, the state's population projections documented increased diversity. While the opportunity gap expanded, Maryland continued doing business, mostly as usual. We now have an opportunity to reverse this trend of amplifying school and racial disparities. What we are asking is to reclaim a leadership role, here and for the nation. Create and implement workable practices with students by race, gender, class, language, ability and every intersecting youth category. I strongly and respectfully urge this committee to report favorably on HB1089, which would position Maryland as a leader in investing in student supports that are proven to work and guide students towards a better path than criminalization.

Thank you,
Phyllis Lerner