



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

Lydia Walther-Rodriguez, On Behalf of CASA
Ways and Means Committee

February 3, 2021

Dear Honorable Chair Kaiser, Honorable Vice Chair Washington and Members of the ways and Means Committee:

CASA is pleased to provide favorable testimony in support of House Bill 496, Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion, to redirect School Resource Officers (SRO)'s funds toward much needed student health services, wraparound support, and restorative practices.

CASA is the largest immigrant rights and services organization in the Mid-Atlantic region, representing a membership of over 100,000 working class immigrant families from Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. CASA operates a total of 10 school and afterschool programs in Langley Park, Prince George's County, and the Baltimore region, serving over 600 students per year in direct academic programming. As a civic engagement (second level) to our academic programs, CASA facilitates students into our youth leadership development committees, where students organize, and uplift thousands of immigrant youth voices on their identified student issues and concerns.

Through the direct testimony of students who have participated and/or currently are in our youth programs, we have heard countless accounts of school resource officers' using extreme force on Black and Brown students, including members of CASA. Students from our programs recount escalating conflicts that arose due to lack of communication with school security personnel and SRO's that have used intimidation tactics towards immigrant students by asking them about their immigration status. From 2017 - 2019, CASA saw students from Prince George's County, in particular, have school based issues escalated by SROs that have resulted in students - not directly associated with the incident - being detained by ICE.

As our students have described and as data shows, SROs do not keep our students and educators safe¹. As schools increase their use of police, more and more crimes, many of which are non-serious crimes get reported to law enforcement - with Black students being overrepresented in these arrests. Unfortunately, SROs in schools are often responding to situations that require a trained counselor, not a police officer with weapons. Unfortunately, SROs in schools have deeply contributed to the school to prison pipeline and ultimately driven higher representation of youth in prison. We strongly believe that HB496 shifts

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07418825.2011.615754>

funding away from harmful police presence that disproportionately impacts Black and Brown students, and students with disabilities - and moves critical spending toward resources that work.

As a member of the Maryland Coalition for Justice and Police Accountability (MCJPA), a statewide coalition of over 90 organizations united behind five critical police reforms², including removing police from our children's schools, we are in strong support of this legislation. We strongly believe that the \$10 million per year of SRO funds that would be redirected so that districts can hire counselors, social workers, school psychologists, restorative approaches practitioners, community school coordinators, and implement trauma-informed practices would be transformational for both the emotional and educational impact to our students. Finally, as the bill mandates, it is critical to require reporting on the use of force by school security and on calls to City or County police for incidents in school - as well, as strengthen the School Safety Subcabinet Advisory Board to include families impacted by school-based arrest, and experts in student mental health and conflict resolution.

For the reasons outlined above, CASA urges a favorable report on HB 496.

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² <https://www.mcjpa.org/5-reforms>