



February 1, 2021

Members of the Maryland General Assembly Ways and Means Committee,

The Baltimore Movement of Rank and File Educators (BMORE), a movement that draws on the strength created by the collective action and organizing of educators, students, families, and community members of Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPSS), writes today in **strong support of HB0496 “Counselors Not Cops Act” sponsored by Delegate Wilkins.**

BCPSS students deserve to learn in an environment that is free from violence, and it’s time to honestly address the ways we have exacerbated the trauma our students face inside our schools. That means a transformation from the current punitive, carceral logic of the school to prison pipeline to a shift where communities and individuals are accountable to each other, and have the resources to prioritize de-escalation, reconciliation, and restoration in the face of trauma and harms caused. Before we explain why so many of us are calling for police-free schools, we need to know how we got to a place where there are police in schools and what organizing has been happening to resolve it.

The Baltimore City School Police force was created in 1991, but Baltimore City has had police patrolling schools since 1967. Baltimore City School Police Force is the only sworn school police force in the state of Maryland. They are represented by Fraternal Order of Police Baltimore School Police Lodge #5. Officers have full arrest powers within city limits, but defer to Baltimore Police Department for more serious crimes. School police are permitted to carry guns, but with restrictions. There are approximately 117 officers patrolling a student population of 85,000 high-school and middle students.¹ The School Police historically overspend their allocation in the budget. School Police Leadership are never penalized and their spending continues to rise². Meanwhile BCPSS underspends on Social-Emotional Learning based on their budget. The result is that we end up spending far more on police than we do on social emotional learning, including restorative approaches to a positive and safe school climate.

Baltimore is a dangerous place for too many in our school community. We are amongst the most over-policed cities in America. Increasing police funding has proven unable to reduce violence. We have to begin addressing the root causes of violence. We need to be offering social emotional support for our community facing mental health and addiction challenges. We need to train ourselves in restorative practices and de-escalation. Schools would be a good place to start. We know that our students come as they are. Poverty, structural racism and

¹ <https://medium.com/@melissa.schober/safe-at-school-the-baltimore-city-school-police-541a64c16041>

² From <https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/budget>

centuries of disinvestment mean that our students bring the violence and trauma of their communities into the school buildings.

The state never fully funding Baltimore City Schools impacts our ability to meet student needs. When class sizes increase and support staff decreases due to our bare bones budget, there often is no adult available to proactively de-escalate students who are in crisis, much less address root causes of behavior or facilitate restorative conversations to restore harm caused.

Teachers, paraeducators, and school leaders often support physically removing students from the learning environment, as this is the easiest and least resource-draining response. However, students then miss valuable learning time and don't have the school supports to address the underlying root causes. Lack of budget and training for alternative solutions has left us with school police, which are insufficient and have not proven to be successful. When an under-resourced environment is overwhelmed by the needs of the students, the practical will win out over the philosophical. We end up with more police in schools. But for what? As a deterrent to violence in schools? To protect us from a school shooter? School police are currently not filling either of these gaps.

The shooting at Frederick Douglass High School (FDHS) in Baltimore in February 2019 was unfortunate and scary but it was not unique. Like others described in the FBI's "A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013" (which includes school shooters)³, the shooter had a grievance and access to a weapon. As traumatic of an incident as this was for our brothers and sisters at FDHS, it should have been a wake-up call for all of us. Instead of increasing police patrols, we need to establish and fully fund unarmed trained professionals like nonviolent de-escalation teams, community relations stewards and mental health intervention experts to help address grievances before they escalate AS WELL AS as implement stronger gun control. Not more police patrolling our hallways.

Author and social justice scholar Dr. Monique M. Morris reminds us in her book "Sing a Rhythm Dance a Blues" that "safety is co-constructed, not implemented. No one and nothing can be brought in to generate safety. Safety must be developed by the individuals and institutions together. Moreover, police officers are particularly ill-equipped to lead efforts that promote safety in schools because they tend to respond to danger with the same tools used for oppression - intimidation, force, arrest and violence. These methods don't facilitate safety in schools."

If a hammer is the only tool you have, then everything looks like a nail. We urge the Committee members to support HB0496 because it will redirect \$10 million per year currently allocated to SRO/school police and instead allow districts to invest further in student mental health services, wraparound supports, and other restorative approaches. It will allow districts like BCPSS to hire counselors, social workers, school psychologists, restorative practitioners, community school coordinators, and further commit to and implement trauma-informed practices.

³ <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf/view>