

February 1, 2021

In Favor – HB0496 - Primary and Secondary Education – Mental Health Services – Expansion 3 (Counselors Not Cops Act)

Honorable Members of the House:

I submit this testimony in favor of the Primary and Secondary Education – Mental Health Services – Expansion 3 (Counselors Not Cops Act). I was a Baltimore City resident for almost 20 years. During that time, I served on the board of the Violetville Elementary Middle School PTA, as a volunteer with Baltimore Polytechnic PPFA, as a troop leader and cluster leader in Girl Scouts of Maryland, as a facilitator in a youth and young adult Workforce Development Program, and most importantly I am a parent of three students who spent time learning in public schools.

During this time, in all these roles, I rarely witnessed or heard of an incident where school police “Saved the day”. Of course we all remember Deputy First Class Blaine Gaskill, who engaged a shooter at Great Mills in 2018. But for every Deputy Gaskill who uses deadly force, there is a Ms. Palmere, a Mr. Duffin, and the incredible Mr. Jamel Crandall of Career Academy who provide support, direction, resources and treatment that guide students away from violence daily.

In 2018 my community organization reported police misconduct in Baltimore City. In retaliation, Baltimore City officers targeted the children of several volunteers. My own child was taken out of school and held by individuals who then attempted to get me to withdraw a Community Impact Statement. During this incident, and the traumatic threats that happened after, Baltimore City Public School System Police were unable to provide any investigative assistance, any support for the students involved or any sense of safety within the school buildings. For my son, a planned field trip to the University of Maryland Medical School in downtown Baltimore turned in to an incident where he was left alone downtown, and then tracked and harassed because School Police had “no method to track which students are in danger”, and “are not in the school to protect students from outside forces, we just stop fist fights”. For my son, a threat of physical harm shouted by a city officer as he drove by school property, in full view of teachers, administrators, security personnel was “outside what school police do” and “above [the] paygrade” of the School Police officer on duty. For my son and for two other students threats sent via text message during the school day were “the same as the bomb threats sent to the school by kids, school police don’t handle that.” While the events described above are being addressed in civil lawsuits, the lasting impact on the students involved will continue to impact these students and future generations.

School police have proven to be largely ineffective, with the oft-mentioned extraordinarily rare exception of incidents like Deputy Gaskill’s. Contrarily, counselors and mental health professionals provide treatment and resources multiple times every day that create a better future for our children.

As a new post covid world is unfolding, we have an opportunity to shape it into a better brighter future. We must invest in our children’s mental health now. Please vote in favor of HB0496, and show our children they are worth the investment.

Respectfully,

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