

March 3, 2021

Luther Jett

Washington Grove, MD 20880

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: Luther Jett

My name is Luther Jett, and I live in Montgomery County, in state District 39. I am submitting 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).

I am a retired Special Educator. I worked for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) for over 35 years, most of that time as a staff trainer and resource for the Department of Special Education.

As part of our regular staff development program, the Department of Special Education provided on-going training in Nonviolent Crisis Management for staff, professional, para-professional, and supporting services. I was part of a team which developed special guidelines for crisis intervention with students with significant cognitive disabilities and students with autism spectrum disorders.

Intervening when a student of any age or any ability level, is in crisis and engaging in dangerous behaviors is always a fraught situation. Always. We put our focus on de-escalation, knowing that when force is met with force, situations can rapidly spiral out of hand. During every Crisis Management training, we made sure to explain the role of police officers, because there is a tendency to consider calling in the police when students become violently out-of-control. Once you do that, we warned our staff, you no longer have a say in what happens. The police call the shots. They can decide to forcibly restrain the student, put handcuffs on the child, or arrest the child. You have no power. You might be the special educator working with the student, you might even be the school Principal, but once you have called in police officers, you are no longer in charge of that student. The police are.

The bottom line: Police intervention in schools should be the last resort, not the first. And maintaining a standing police presence in schools is not only unnecessary, it could exacerbate tensions. All of our school systems across the state should have staff with the training and resources to manage and de-escalate most crisis situations. Ongoing and expanded training in those skills should be undertaken as schools open up. It is important to ensure that classroom staff, as well as school counselors, administrators, resource specialists, and security staff are involved in this training and that sensitivity training related to the unique needs of students with disabilities is part of that effort.

Based on my own experiences, and my understanding of research-driven best practices, I fully support HB1089. I do so not only out of concern for the students I once served, but also in recognition of the extent to which disciplinary interventions have been disproportionately applied to individuals of color, with or without disabilities. Removing school resource officers from our schools, when accompanied with appropriate training in non-confrontational de-escalation procedures, will lead to safer schools and will allow our school district staff to continue to build a more positive school climate for all. I respectfully urge this committee for a favorable report on HB1089.

Respectfully,

William Luther Jett