

To: Maryland General Assembly, House Ways & Means Committee
From: Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie- Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality
Re: HB 613 School Safety Expenditure Increase
Hearing Date: March 8, 2022

Dear Members,

I write to you today wearing a few hats- mother, teacher, and advocate. I am asking for an unfavorable report on HB 613 because we need smart, therapeutic solutions to school safety, not to continue to throw taxpayer money at a problem in our school that cannot be solved by a badge and a gun.

My son has an IEP and a 504 Plan. As a tall Black 15-year old on the autism spectrum, it worries me every day that he is at an exponentially higher risk for being arrested by an SRO than his white, neurotypical peers. Statewide, special education students make up 12% of the population but 23% of the students arrested by SRO's. In my county, Charles, Black students make up 50% of the population, but are 87% of the arrests, largely because their behaviors are viewed as criminal. My organization, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality, has a court watch program. We have observed that children as young as 11, almost exclusively Black boys, are being arrested for simple infractions such as "being disruptive," skipping class, walking the hallways, and stealing a food item from the cafeteria.

Our organization opposes this bill because instead of funding the services our children REALLY need to be safe, which are trauma-informed staff training, wraparound mental health services, and more civilian support staff- it funds more police, who have proven statistically NOT to be a deterrent or intervention for violence in schools. Schools already have SRO's, paid for by the Safe School Act, and the violence has still ESCALATED over the past year. The one solution we haven't fully given a shot is wellness, mediation, and compassion. As a legislator, you must not lead out of fear. You must make laws that lead our state into the future wisely and set our schools up for the long-term safety and well-being of our students. We ask that you vote unfavorable on HB 613 and use those funds to care for our kids, not occupy their schools.

Sincerely,



Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie
Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality