

3/8/22

TESTIMONY ON HB613- POSITION: UNFAVORABLE
Public Schools - Appropriations for School Safety Expenditures - Increase

TO: Chair McIntosh, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the Appropriations Committee

FROM: Janeane Marks

My name is Janeane Marks. I live in Rockville in District 19. This testimony is in opposition to HB613.

Jewish tradition teaches us the value of “Ki shama Elohim el kol ha’na’ar ba’asher hu sham: For the Holy One heard the voice of the child who was there” (Genesis 21:17). Our tradition tells us that just as the Holy One listened to each of us, so too should we listen to the experiences of those who are experts on their own lives – of the students, educators, and nurses like myself who have had negative interactions with School Resource Officers.

As a nurse with over 42 years of experience in health care and a graduate degree in health promotion counseling, I have worked to promote healthy behaviors among adolescents in many clinical settings. I worked as a school community health nurse in Montgomery County high schools and elementary schools from 1993 until my retirement from Montgomery County Health and Human Services in 2014.

I have significant concerns about the utilization of police officers in schools. Initially, particularly after the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary, I welcomed police presence in high schools. I had worked with police officers before when they had been called by high school administration and security teams. My feelings changed based on my own experiences working alongside a school resource officer.

Here are four situations that illustrate my concerns.

Based on an inappropriate request from an assistant principal, the SRO consistently followed a pregnant African American student with a history of emotional problems, each time she left the classroom to use the restroom. She came to the health room in tears, telling me and the health room aide that the officer was “following” her.

The SRO repetitively intervened when students were brought to me for evaluation for suspected substance abuse. The SRO had no knowledge of students’ confidential medical history. He entered the health room without consulting me and did his own evaluation. These actions were disruptive as each time he did this, the health room ceased to be an environment of support and confidentiality, creating a very different climate for students. These events worked to decrease the trust among students that the health room was a place concerned with security, privacy, and effective healthcare delivery.

I was called to evaluate a student with a known seizure disorder who was experiencing a seizure in the hallway. When I evaluated the student, I noted involuntary movements of her arms and legs. However, I also noted that she was conscious and able to respond to me. When the rescue squad arrived the SRO met and told the rescue squad that the student had a grand mal seizure – which was inaccurate. I shared with the rescue squad the student had maintained consciousness and did not have a grand mal seizure. Dismissing my nursing and first responder role, the SRO openly challenged me, dismissing my expertise, in front of the rescue squad, school staff, and everyone present. Afterwards I spoke with the school principal and was told that school resource officers are not accountable to Montgomery County Public Schools.

I met with a high school student who expressed suicidal intentions. I contacted the assistant principal assigned to this student's grade level – per school policy – as well as attempting unsuccessfully to reach a parent. When I was unable to reach a parent, I asked for Montgomery County Crisis Team support. This meant that the student would be escorted to the Montgomery County Crisis Center for evaluation. The SRO, with no knowledge of the information I had received from the student, appeared in my office and informed the assistant principal that the student did not need to be evaluated and he did not wish to escort the student. I insisted that the student required evaluation. After some discussion, the assistant principal promised me that he would escort the student.

These issues are not unique to Montgomery County. The same trends can be seen clearly across the entire state. Maryland leads the nation in incarcerating young black men ages 18 -24. Police officers are placed in a unique environment – the schools – with limited training to deal with children who have complex educational, health, social, and emotional needs. This limits their capabilities and has the potential to make these situations more harmful. Significant data confirm that the removal of SROs will benefit racial equity in our state. And data shows that students are best served by increasing staffing and allowing highly trained teachers, mental health professionals, counselors, school nurses, and well-trained security teams to provide a safe and healthy learning community.

For these reasons, I urge you to oppose HB613 and instead support the full removal of police from school and replacing each police officer with a full time mental health professional.

Thank you,
Janeane Marks