

To: Maryland General Assembly
From: Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie, Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality
Re: HB 84/ SB 119
Date 01/17/2021

I'm writing this testimony to you today, appropriately on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, as a parent of a student, a teen with an IEP and a 504 plan. I write as a former teacher who has taught students in crisis. I also write as a community advocate who's tired of the children in my area being pushed into the system of court dates, lawyers, charges, detention, and all those other scary things- just for being a human child. I was a teacher before I was a mom. I've taught mostly Black/Latinx students in Atlanta, DC, and Silver Spring, and over the years, I had several students who came to school bearing trauma. Some things they had been through are things some adults on this call could hardly bear. I've taught students who arrive sleepy and cranky from working or taking care of siblings. I've overlooked outbursts because I know the student is witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse. Maybe they're being bullied online or in person. And I've referred them to counseling or social workers. I've had kids who have tried to interrupt the whole class every time they were asked to read aloud because they struggled with reading. At times kids seek any attention they can get because they haven't learned healthy ways to get the support they need. They throw tantrums, they curse, yell, wander, throw things. It's my own son, who I advocated for to have a yellow folder to indicate he needed to walk out into the hall and take a break when he was frustrated. It was in his plan! But according to the law in question, my son could have thrown his backpack on the floor and be charged with a misdemeanor? Really though, the scariest fact is that this "disturbance" is all up to the staff's discretion. Do they see a child having a meltdown? Or do they see a criminal who needs to be arrested and charged? The statistics you've heard make it very clear. Black/Brown kids aren't given the benefit of the doubt here. DO most parents out there even realize their kids could be charged with a misdemeanor for "being disruptive in school?" And in this pandemic reality, we will need even MORE therapeutic support for our children's behaviors. We're already at 1700 referrals a year!

This statute must be repealed because it gives school staff license to criminalize literally any behavior that a child does to say "please, pay attention to me." Please vote in favor of HB 84 and SB 119.

Sincerely,



Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie
Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality