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POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: HB214 - Education – Reportable Offenses

FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender

POSITION: Unfavorable

DATE: January 31, 2022

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Committee issue an unfavorable report on House Bill 214.

Under current Maryland law, police are required to report to schools whenever a student is arrested in the community for one of over 50 potential offenses. Some schools have abused this law to remove students from school with very little process, even if the arrest had nothing to do with school and the student's presence has no impact on school safety. This is one of the last and most draconian features of our former school discipline system, and perpetuates the school to prison pipeline. HB 214 would increase the scope of reportable offenses, further restricting access to a free and appropriate education, without any consideration of whether the increased reporting is necessary for school safety.

Under current law, school districts routinely and unilaterally remove students for indefinite periods of time when students are arrested off of school grounds for conduct unrelated to schools. While Maryland has numerous statutes and regulations requiring important due process protections for children regarding disciplinary procedures for in-school conduct, our laws are silent surrounding the due process protections for children subject to a reportable offense, an arrest for *alleged* out-of-school conduct. The allegations subject to reporting often have no nexus to the child's educational needs or school safety.

The practices and policies around reportable offenses vary largely between jurisdictions, and there is currently no data that is required to be collected on the treatment of children arrested for a reportable offense. That means we have nothing beyond anecdotes from our clients and families to understand the scope of reportable offense removal abuse, and no way to hold school systems accountable.

Under current law a student can be removed from school with minimal process for a mere arrest outside of school that they are never proven to have committed. In the past three years:

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- Almost 50% of all cases forwarded to the Department of Juvenile Services were resolved with no formal or informal action taken;
- Almost 60% were resolved without ever being formalized in court;
- 20-30% of all cases that were formalized for court action were ultimately dismissed.¹

These statistics make clear that even under the current law, the vast majority of children who can be and are removed from school are never found guilty of anything at all, making the removal all the more harmful to the child and divorced from school safety.

While removed from school awaiting disposition of reportable offense cases, these children suffer irreparable harm. Quite often, they are moved to alternative schools that do not offer the education they need, whether it is special education services, advanced placements, or elective classes. At times, instead of being moved to another school, they are placed on home tutoring, receiving workbooks that they are expected to complete on their own with only a few hours of instruction from a tutor each week. During the period when they are removed from school, students cannot participate in extra-curricular activities such as athletics and student government, leaving a gaping hole in their academic transcripts. And, when the case is adjudicated, the students are placed back at their home schools without any compensatory services to help them through the transition, vital when students as young as 11 have missed out on the important socialization of early middle school.

HB214 would expand the scope of what is reported to include the arrests of students who are in the care and custody of the Department of Juvenile Services, including for arrests that are not included in the already-lengthy list of reportable offenses. There is no clear nexus between the arrests subject to the expanded reporting requirements of HB 214 and school safety, thus subjecting even more children to the already harmful repercussions of a reportable offense without any clear benefit to the school population.

For these reasons, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to issue a unfavorable report on HB 214.

Submitted by: Government Relations Division of the Maryland Office of the Public Defender.

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¹ Maryland Department of Juvenile Services *Data Resource Guide: Fiscal Year 2021* at 28, available at https://djs.maryland.gov/Documents/DRG/Data_Resource_Guide_FY2021.pdf