

4 March 2024

Congressmen and Congresswomen,

On Wednesday you will hear about HB1400 – Student Use of Force, presented by Senator Carter with witness statements from several members of Bee a Rae of Sunshine Foundation. Rachael Cash, Founder, will share with you about her daughter, her family’s story, and how the current legislation couldn’t allow her daughter to protect herself. Today, I want to tell you my perspective as a teacher in the Maryland Public School System, and why HB1400 is essential for protecting students and their futures.

I have been a part of Carroll County Public Schools (CCPS) since 1999 when I began Kindergarten. I attended two different high schools, went to college locally and worked in 3 different middle schools throughout college as an intern and practicum student. I am now in my ninth year as a high school teacher, working in my third high school in CCPS. My experiences in these buildings have one scary thing in common – fights. I was a straight A student involved in sports, tutoring, honor societies, Class Office, etc. I worked two jobs in high school, refereed youth soccer, and volunteered regularly with over 2000 hours upon graduation. As a student, I was in several physical altercations where I was defending myself or others, never receiving a suspension or punishment beyond mediation. I wasn’t a student looking for a fight, and I was well-liked by my peers. I was always encouraged by my parents to stand up for myself and for those who can’t stand up for themselves. The use of force was required to get myself and others to safety, but had I been afraid of a mark on my record, I would have never protected others and involved myself in their defense, knowing how important it was for my financial future to go to college and become a teacher.

Weekly, I hear about fights in high schools from my students, building coworkers, county and state colleagues, and there is always a common denominator – a staff or student wanted to help, but was afraid – afraid of the lack of support if you become attacked as a staff member, afraid of being charged or falsely accused if its not fully on camera, or afraid of being suspended, having a record on your transcript to colleges, and being made ineligible from extracurricular sports, performances, and activities. Not only are students fearful of being helpful, but administrators are not required to investigate and determine an aggressor before issuing consequences. Some do, but they aren’t required, so many do not. There is an array of issues that stem from the current legislation and processes, which is why our efforts in changing legislation are beginning with HB1400 – Student Use of Force. But there is more work to do. For example, administrators’ hands are often tied by the Board of Education who has to track and avoid fines from Maryland State Department of Education for exceeding their suspensions allotment. Students who threaten, attack, and bully are currently receiving lesser consequences, not to mention the other offenses that result in suspension. HB1400 would directly help with this count because every student in an altercation who is not at fault would not receive a full suspension as their only consequence option, and therefore less suspension days would be issued, resulting in more aggressors and bullies receiving a full 5-day suspension.

SB 1032- Student Use of Force is a stepping stone for additional legislation that will make schools safer and more consistent for our students and staff. Bee a Rae of Sunshine Foundation is in honor of MaKenzi Rae Cash, who was a freshman at my school, and who played in my private club volleyball program. She just wanted to go to school and be left alone, but she feared so deeply of being attacked, as do many students every day, because of the zero-tolerance policy currently in place. She tragically passed due to a medication reaction from a depression medication that she was taking a result of bullying. For the sake of every student enrolled in Maryland Public Schools, I ask you to support HB1400 knowing that bystanders will feel safer helping victims, victims won’t be required to be punished by the law, and administrators will be required to investigate the events leading up to an altercation.

Thank you for your consideration,

*Serra Jarboe*