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House Bill 821: Prince George's County - Student Support - Specialist Networks and Success Action Plans (Student Supports and Success Act) PG 502-24

Hearing before the House Committee on Ways and Means, February 14, 2024

Position: FAVORABLE, WITH AMENDMENT

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a nonprofit legal services organization which advocates for social justice, and economic and racial equity in Maryland, including by upholding the rights of historically excluded and underserved students through individual representation, community outreach, and systemic advocacy. We are committed to making discipline responsive to students' behavioral needs, fair, appropriate to the infraction, and designed to keep youth on track to graduate.

The PJC supports with amendment House Bill 821, in which Prince George's County Public Schools would create a student-centered network that approaches school pushout by addressing the root causes of behavioral issues, contributing to a more supportive and inclusive school environment. We would support a version of this bill that excludes school resource officers and school security employees from the network.

Why Exclusionary Discipline Doesn't Work

Exclusionary discipline, such as the use of suspensions and expulsions, has long been employed as a method to address behavioral issues in schools. However, research and experience have shown that this punitive approach often fails to create a positive school climate or lead to improved student behavior. Instead, it exacerbates the underlying problems, disproportionately affects marginalized students, and contributes to a culture of disengagement and resentment.

In Maryland, Black students are about three times as likely to experience exclusionary discipline than white students, despite the enrollment of Black and white students being nearly identical. For instance, in the 2022-2023 school year, Black students made up approximately 33% of the state's total student enrollment but received 58% of the state's out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. On the other hand, white student also made up approximately 33% of the state's total student enrollment but received only 21% of the state's out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. Students with disabilities are also twice as likely to be suspended or expelled than their non-disabled peers in Maryland.

Research shows that implicit bias, cultural stereotypes, and explicit prejudice explain why Black and Brown students are disciplined at much higher rates than white students. This is all the more true for subjective offenses like disrespect, defiance, or disruption. Maryland data shows the real-life impact of this – in the 2022-23 school year, approximately 54% of the out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for disrespect or disruption were imposed on Black students.

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Teachers are more likely to refer Black students to the office for disciplinary action, even when they exhibit the same behavior as white students, and once in an administrator's office, Black students are more likely to receive a harsher punishment.

Restorative Justice and Increasing Access to Mental Health Supports

The use of restorative justice practices in Prince George's County Schools offers a transformative alternative to student behavior. By emphasizing dialogue, empathy, and understanding, restorative justice encourages students to take responsibility for their actions and fosters a sense of community within the school. This approach not only addresses the root causes of behavioral issues but also contributes to a more supportive and inclusive school environment.¹

The same can be said for increasing access to mental health supports within schools; when students regularly connect with an adult whom they trust, they are more likely to go to that person when they are experiencing crisis and are more likely to have the supports necessary to work through behavioral issues in a healthy, non-disruptive way. By increasing student interactions with counseling services, mental health professionals, and other support mechanisms such as those in this bill, Prince George's County Public Schools can take a proactive approach that aims to prevent behavioral issues rather than simply reacting to them with punitive measures.

Amendment: Remove SRO's and SSE's From the Network

While recognizing that School Resource Officers (SROs) and School Security Employees (SSEs) are thus far a mainstay in schools, it is crucial to acknowledge the harm they present to students of color, and those with disabilities. SROs and SSEs have arrest authority within the school setting, and their presence alone can escalate a situation that could otherwise have been addressed through non-punitive means. By including SROs and SSEs in the process of arranging student's behavioral and mental health supports, Prince George's County Public Schools run the risk of increasing a student's interaction with the legal system. This bill should minimize SROs' and SSEs' involvement or emphasize the need for de-escalation training and clear guidelines on their involvement.

By prioritizing restorative justice, increasing mental health support, and implementing measures to minimize school pushout, Prince George's County can build school cultures that promote understanding, resilience, and success for all its students.

For these reasons, PJC supports with amendment House Bill 821.

For more information contact:

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¹ ISD 287's *Student Safety Coaches: Summary of Literature and Staff Survey, School Year 2019-2020*, Lindsay Turner at 4. Wilder Foundation, Intermediate District 287 (Sept. 2020), <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/isd-287s-student-safety-coaches-summary-literature-and-staff>.

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