

**Support HB 488**

Public Schools – Discipline – Related Data – Collection and Publication

Testimony of Aubrey Edwards-Luce, Esq., MSW

February 12, 2025

House Ways and Means Committee

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins and Esteemed Members of the Committee:

I am the Executive Director of the Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC), with the University of Baltimore School of Law (UBalt Law). CFCC has been operating the Tackling Chronic Absenteeism Project (TCAP) in Baltimore City Public Schools since 2005. During that time, we have seen first-hand a disproportionate number of Black and Brown students, along with students with disabilities, suspended and/or expelled from their schools. Through our prevention/early intervention program, we endeavor to break the school-to-prison pipeline and foster improved school connections, sense of belonging, and academic success.

Suspensions and expulsions are the catalysts for a destructive cycle of disengagement from school, which begins with truancy and ends with the school-to-prison pipeline. Truancy is identified clearly as one of the early warning signs that youth potentially are headed for delinquent activity, social isolation, and/or educational failure. Research has shown that truancy is related to delinquency, substance abuse, high school dropout, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and early sexual behaviors. These early patterns have long-term costs for both the individual and society. There are more effective ways of dealing with “misbehaving students” that allow them to remain in the classroom and learn.

Unlike disciplinary practices that remove students from school, the TCAP has a two-fold positive impact on the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline often begins with teachers and administrators using exclusionary school discipline policy and practices that isolate students from their education and their school community.<sup>1</sup> First, the TCAP helps students bypass the school-to-prison pipeline by utilizing restorative practices with TCAP students and parents that assist them in deepening their interpersonal skills and increasing their access to community supports that encourages the students’ attendance and positive connection to their schools. This helps TCAP students avoid situations that are often met with exclusionary school discipline such as, lack of uniforms, disengagement in the classroom, or lack of self-regulation. Second, TCAP’s non-punitive and restorative approach helps to foster a school environment that discourages exclusionary discipline practices and encourages more empathy, understanding, and support from school personnel and administrators. We have seen that by changing the trajectory of even a few students, our action can have a ripple effect on the entire school community, improving school attendance and school culture.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8277150/>

We applaud HB 488's mandate to promote greater transparency, data collection, and action. Providing data in accessible electronic spreadsheets will allow us to quickly identify which schools and districts require greater support and which schools and districts with low suspension rates can serve as models for reform. By harnessing data to focus resources and supports to those schools and districts with the highest need, we can facilitate a better allocation of resources. School communities need supports to address disparities. Requiring the Department to provide local education agencies (LEAs) with the resources and supports needed to address the disparities will help LEAs effectuate the change needed to support our most vulnerable students. Moreover, by having the Department play a critical role in creating the solution to address disparities, we can build off of lessons learned from one LEA to another and create models for reform.

Lastly, we also applaud the expansion of data collection to include the disaggregation of data for students: with 504 plans, by socioeconomic status, and by English Language Proficiency – areas not always represented in disaggregated data collection. Too often these groups of students are neglected in efforts to reduce disparities. When we can identify which discrete categories of students are most often disciplined, we can begin to draft policies and provide supports and training to create change. In recent years, Baltimore City has seen increased enrollment rates of refugees, with limited English Proficiency. Since the Covid pandemic, TCAP has seen higher rates of poverty, reflected in housing instability and families needing assistance with basic needs such as food. If we can identify trends of higher suspension rates with these discrete populations, we can identify ways to better support students' families, without the need for exclusionary practices.

For these reasons, we urge the committee for **a favorable report on HB 488.**

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