

Testimony in Support of Special Appropriations - December 1, 2020

1. \$406,000 for Youth Development - After School Youth Support & Engagement Hubs
2. \$750,000 for Restorative Justice Training for MCEA School Staff
3. \$312,455 for Children, Youth, and Family Services - Therapeutic Recreation Services for School-Age Youth

My name is Phyllis Lerner, I live in District 1. Today I am representing Jews United for Justice, with over 2,500 members of the Montgomery County Jewish community advocating for racial and economic equity. I am testifying in support of three special appropriations to the Fiscal Year 2021 budget: \$750,000 for restorative justice training for MCEA school staff; \$406,000 for after-school youth support and engagement hubs; and \$312,455 for therapeutic recreation services for school-age youth. Thank you to Councilmembers Jawando and Riemer for your leadership in introducing these special appropriations.

My parents moved to Chevy Chase in the 1940's, when there were still covenants against selling homes to Jewish and Black people. While my family came via Russia and New York's Lower East Side, I was privileged enough to be born here. I had a Montgomery County Public School education, considered among the best in the country. It inspired me to become an educator. I still am. I remain committed to kids and learning - before, during, and after school.

Punishing and criminalizing children goes back to when schools began. Some painful patterns persisted, after *Brown v. Board of Education* and, in the 1980's, when the *war on crime* crept into schools. Highly controlling discipline plans underlie the *school to prison pipeline*. This is observable when kids are arrested, handcuffed and formally charged, or when young children are lined up in the hall, hands behind their backs and walked silently to lunch.

We need to move away from punitive hierarchies—systems which reflect racial inequities, as has been the case in Montgomery County. We must implement effective models of Restorative Justice. *The best thing we can do for kids...instead of teaching them how to always be successful... is to teach them how to respond, when they are not.*

My undergraduate degree is in physical education and youth development. I was the consultant brought in by The Boys Clubs of America, when they went “co-ed” in 1990. I was a founding Board Officer of Girls Inc of Washington DC, the first *town and gown* program (in partnership

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with Howard University) in the country. For the past five winter semesters, I have volunteered with Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village, a post-genocide high school in Rwanda, for orphaned and vulnerable youth. The healing happens there via the co-curriculum – not the lessons in a structured class. It’s the enrichment activities and the grouping of kids into families, with a Mama, that becomes transformative.

I also come to you as an instructor with Johns Hopkins University Graduate School of Education. I was on the small team which designed our national master’s degree partnership with TFA (Teach For America).

JUFJ frames our work in a Jewish context. Proverbs 22:6 states “Direct your children onto the *right path*, and when they are older, they will not leave it.” This county has already identified racial disparities in arrests with SROs in schools. Whether it’s a student who instigates a hallway fight, or the bystanders, seeing their friend handcuffed, neither will guide our children onto the “right path.”

What will direct students to the right path is support, and this appropriations package is a crucial step. Student leaders have been advocating for robust mental health services, and JUFJ has heard them. Future investments in their long-term achievement is supported by their lived experience, my professional expertise, and our Jewish values. Please authorize these bills and in the coming fiscal years, fund additional mental health staff for education. Thank you.