

**TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE MARC ELRICH ON BILL 46-20, POLICE –
SCHOOL RESOURCES OFFICERS PROHIBITED**

Greetings Council President and Councilmembers, my name is Caroline Sturgis, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer. I appear before you today on behalf of County Executive Elrich regarding Bill 46-20, Police – School Resources Officers Prohibited. The County Executive supports removing fulltime SRO from the schools, replacing officers with a team of mental health professionals and providing adequate law enforcement coverage through alternate means.

The bill would prohibit the Montgomery County Police Department from deploying school resource officers in schools, thereby ending the SRO program. It further requires that the County provide adequate local law enforcement coverage for public schools as required by State and County laws. The bill describes school mental health programs have been shown to reduce suspensions, reduce behavioral problems, decrease absences, reduce disciplinary problems, and increase academic achievement; however, it does not address safety and appropriate alternatives to address the current system that relies on school resources officers. While the services mentioned in the bill are needed, they alone will not address either safety or racial and ethnic disparities that disadvantage primarily Black and Latinx students.

SROs operate as part of a larger system and a school system culture. That overarching system determines which issues and what kinds of behaviors result in SROs acting with students. Eliminating SROs from schools will not alone change the culture. Increasing human service and mental health resources, including restorative justice training, are a first step to changing the culture in schools and over time will reduce the reliance on SROs for school safety. The County Executive has advocated before and continues for the need of increasing the availability of mental health and counseling services for school-age children in Montgomery County.

The SRO Program has generated significant debate for many years in our County, as well as nationwide. We have seen spirited discussions from various stakeholders throughout our community and strong advocates for both sides of the spectrum, those supporting the program and those against it. Currently, there are multiple groups evaluating and developing recommendations for the SRO program in addition to this Council body. Others include:

- Montgomery County Public Schools Board of Education.
- The County’s Policing Advisory Commission.
- The County Executive created a Reimagining Public Safety Task Force to look at reforming how Montgomery County deliver public safety services in a more equitable manner. The Task Force recommendations report was released earlier today and one of the group’s key recommendations is to eliminate the SRO program and replace officers with counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals.
- And a few State bills are being introduced at the General Assembly that aim to change the SRO program.

As we consider this bill, it is important to fully understand the experiences of those impacted by the school resource officer program. There are several national research studies that demonstrate police presence in schools increase student arrests for minor offenses. During the last full school year of 2018-2019, the Montgomery County Police Department reports 97% of the 420 SRO criminal arrests and civil infractions were initiated by school personnel. This means the SRO was notified by administrators or staff that they had a student detained in the office for an offense, or they needed the SRO to assist with a disturbance or other emergency. These offenses breakdown to 40 physical arrests, 239 charged on paper, 140 civil citations, and 1 criminal citation. The Office of Legislative Oversight analysis reports 74% of school-based arrests were conducted by police officers assigned to the school and 79% of students arrested at school were students of color. 87% of arrests included suspensions. There are disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsions in MCPS for Black and Latinx students. These disparities highlight the concerns of the school-to-prison pipeline and the Elrich administration share the goal of eliminating those fears.

We are equally concerned with school safety and want students and faculty to be able to learn and teach in a safe environment. The Maryland Safe to Learn Act of 2018 requires "adequate local law enforcement coverage" through the presence of school resource officers and/or local law enforcement in or near public schools. Per the Act's Fiscal and Policy Note, all public schools must either have an SRO assigned to them or adequate law enforcement coverage beginning in the 2019-20 school year. The law does not define adequate law enforcement coverage; thereby leaving that to jurisdictions to define. Under the Act, SROs are not required in all schools but may be assigned to schools or the local law enforcement agency may provide coverage to the school.

With the flexibility of the law as previously described, the County Executive is exploring delivering "adequate coverage" in accordance with the Safe to Learn Act by creating a cluster model for each police district. The model would utilize existing MCPD staff and municipal agencies currently participating in the SRO program within a district. The current SRO will become school Cluster Liaison Officers (CLO), work in partnership with the district Community Service Officer, and provide coverage to a group of schools that can be responded to in a timely manner. Under this restructured school cluster liaison program, officers would check-in at their assigned schools at least once during the workday, patrol the areas around their assigned schools, and respond to calls for service at their schools. Because arrival and dismissal times vary between high school, middle school, and elementary school, the CLO will be a presence in the area around their schools during these times. In the event of open lunch for high school students, the CLO will patrol the areas frequented by students during this time.

Under this restructured program, officers would not be available all day on school campuses. We believe daily check-ins, having officers in the proximity, and being able to respond more quickly meets the adequate coverage. Officers will continue to be encouraged to cultivate positive relationships with the students without them being in schools to police the students. Administrators and school security officers should deal with student misconduct through restorative justice and equitable disciplining instead of seeking police intervention. We should

also augment schools with counselors and mental health professionals as an alternative to keeping school safe while supporting the needs of students through social workers. And when the services of police are needed, the schools may call in police as a last resort – not the first option.

In summary, the County Executive supports reimagining public safety in our community and schools. His vision includes reforming the School Resources Officers program that shifts the officers away from a permanent assignment in schools to a school Cluster Liaison Officer model as previously described. CLOs will still be required to complete customized SRO trainings developed by the state, Maryland Center for School Safety, and MCPD to guide officers on how to work well with adolescents in a school environment. This along with everything previously mentioned supports safety, equity, and the wellbeing of our students, faculty, and communities.