

March 1, 2021

Montgomery County Council  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Council Members,

I am writing in support of County Council Bill 7-21, Police – School Resource Officers sponsored by Council Members Rice and Katz and co-sponsored by Friedson.

I am a 27 year long resident of Montgomery County and have been involved at the local school PTA and PTSA levels in all the years I have lived here. Additionally, I served as a member and chair of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs Grading and Reporting Committee, as a member of the MCCPTA Board of Directors from 2007-2013, and as Northwest Cluster Coordinator for four years (2009-2013). As many of you know, I have been an active advocate of the School Resource Officers program at the local, state and national levels since 2008. At that time, I was both a member at the Board of Directors level of the MCCPTA as a Committee Chair and was also a member of the Health & Safety Committee.

At my children's high school, I saw firsthand the need for additional police-based support within our schools. A rise in violence, gang-related activity, weapons use and fighting, not to mention drugs and assault against students and school staff called to light the need for additional support beyond the school security staff. Through the SRO program, response times have been shortened, relationships have been built between police and youth and mediatory meetings held to resolve matters without recommendations for out-of-school suspensions where possible.

Bill 46-20 aims to eliminate the SRO program in order to “favorably impact racial equity and social justice in the County if funding allocated for SROs is reallocated to programs that promote students’ mental health and social, emotional learning.” Racial equity is not at stake with OUR SRO program. Regardless of whether police are located in or outside of our schools, incidents will continue and arrests will continue to be made by beat officers. Funding for SROs—originally covered by national, and state safety grants when the program began as the Educational Facilities Officers program - should not be skimmed from the county police budget. I would agree that added counseling and youth mental health services are much needed. Long before implementation of the EFO program, parents and educators were requesting additional counseling services for students in need to address a variety of societal, mental health and relational issues facing our youth.

Some opposed to this Bill seek elimination of the SRO program at both the State and (Montgomery) county levels would have you believe – wrongfully - that the program is a contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline. That is a myth and is far from the

truth. Serious school incidents are down in Montgomery County by more than 50% since the introduction of the Educational Facilities Officers (“EFO”) program in 2001. SROs have prevented fights and serious incidents, mediated disputes among students, participated in restorative justice circles and worked with students, family, staff and administrators to correct behavior. In my children’s high school, our SRO intervened before a student committed suicide, having been tipped off. In 97% of the cases referred to an SRO, the recommendation for arrests were made by school administrators – not the SRO. The reverse thinking that SROs pursue arrest of a student is both myth and misconception. The SRO is the only individual in the school building with legal arresting authority.

A detailed Memorandum of Understanding between MCPS and MCPD guides the actions of an SRO. It would be highly regrettable for this Council to interfere in MCPS’s ability to run its schools the way it would like to by banning SROs from school buildings. Doing so will mean that beat officers will respond, response times will increase to at least 10 minutes or longer, responding officers will likely not know the student(s) involved and likely not have the specialized social emotional training SROs have. The short of it is that serious incidents will increase and responses will not be as well-tailored or handled in the future. This is not a decision that should be made by our Council Members. As Bill 7-21 sets out, that decision should be left to the professional and knowledgeable administrators in our schools.

I have also submitted testimony in opposition to HB1089 and shared with the Maryland General Assembly that governance of the state, county and local school systems should be left to the individual school boards. Your first priority must be for public safety, not against it. Without it, public education and all those involved will suffer. Students cannot learn, and teachers cannot educate in an unsafe school environment.

You must carefully consider the local schools’ student incident data alongside that reported by the Maryland State Department of Education. You must confer with all stakeholders. There is an abundance of data that supports the reasoning behind the Bill and which strongly supports why the full Council should support it. Similarly, the State of Maryland should support local schools’ governance of their own districts, as should this Council.

Statistically speaking, the five largest school districts that have experienced the greatest positive impact via reduction of serious school incidents (Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Howard County, Montgomery County and Prince George’s County) have both the greatest number of students combined and the most to lose should Bill 7-21 fail to be passed. When viewing the incident and arrest data disaggregated by school versus aggregated by the entire county, it becomes clear that the data does not support the allegation that SROs contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Conversely, they are helping to reduce those numbers. Specifically, since 2001, serious school incidents have fallen by 51% while at the same time, student numbers have increased by 19%. The data must be obtained, reviewed, analyzed and that information and the local school district should in turn develop strategies before downsizing or complete program elimination.

The SRO program should not be eliminated - especially in the midst of a pandemic and year-long virtual learning environment - when so much is at risk with the return to school and when social-emotional needs the public schools will be greatest.

Montgomery County Public School principals have unanimously voted to support retention of the SRO Program. Our principals are the ones who rely on SROs to keep staff and students safe and can attest to the direct benefits of the program.

SROs benefit MCPS in the following ways:

1. maintaining positive relationships and contact with students
2. participating in Restorative Justice Circles
3. providing wellness checks and mental health EAPs for students in crisis
4. leading school drills, and
5. other functions they perform daily for the benefit of all students

Last, outside threats here in Montgomery County have occurred, during which my local high school's SRO was able to play a part in keeping all in the school safe. In 2007, my son was a sophomore in high school, when another student (having been robbed by a different student who had shown a gun to the boy robbed), allowed his elder brother into the school in a plot for revenge. Our SRO de-escalated that incident. Later, there were multiple bomb threats at the high school and I felt comforted knowing an SRO was on school property to safeguard our children. There have been several incidents (one being a potential suicide and many others fights) that our SRO helped to head off and/or diffuse altogether. All of this is a testament to the value we have experienced with a dedicated SRO in the building at our large high school of nearly 3000 students.

The statewide SRO programs must not be reduced or eliminated until such time that we have those additional mental health resources in place, AND/OR we have concrete evidence that explicitly supports any potential benefit of reducing or eliminating them.

Montgomery County Public Schools' School Safety and Security data proves the SRO program works here in Montgomery County and in MCPS, showing greater than a 50% reduction in the number of serious incidents annually in MCPS. Please support Bill 7-21.

Thank you.

Beth Kennington  
Gaithersburg, Maryland