

Testimony for Montgomery County Council

Bill 7-21, Police – School Resource Officer – Building Positive Law Enforcement Relationships Within Schools

By
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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify about this important topic. I rise in support of the Rice/Katz bill. I believe the bill's requirements that SRO's receive enhanced training and professional development and be deployed at the superintendent's request, represents a balanced and common-sense approach. What's appropriate for school A might not be appropriate for school B. To localize the bill even further, I suggest that an SRO be deployed at the request of the superintendent in consultation with the school board, local PTA, and/or the principal of the school being considered.

Additionally, it is not enough for the Council to talk about increasing funding for mental health services. I urge the Council to amend whatever bill it passes, or pair it with another bill, to require that counselors be trained in, and regularly assessed on, the provision of culturally appropriate and competent care. A couple of statistics according to the American Psychiatric Association¹:

1. Compared with the general population, African Americans are less likely to be offered either evidence-based medication therapy or psychotherapy.²
2. Several studies have found that bilingual patients are evaluated differently when interviewed in English as opposed to Spanish and that Hispanics are more frequently undertreated³.
3. A barrier to care for minority communities includes the stigma associated with mental illness⁴.

Further, I urge Councilmembers and members of the community to remember that many kids need/want someone to talk to, especially now. While Debating if SROs should be in Schools is appropriate, I urge us all to be mindful not to imply that children cannot, should not, and/or have not found solace/comfort in chatting with an SRO. In my view, doing so can be perceived as disrespectful and condescending⁵.

¹ See also the American Psychological Association - <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/health-disparities/health-care-reform>

² <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts> - See mental health facts for African Americans.

³ <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts> - See mental health facts for Hispanics and Latinos/as

⁴ See footnotes 2 and 3.

⁵ "To simply put it, a cop is a cop. A cop is not a mentor. A cop is not a counselor," said Lauren Payne, a student at Richard Montgomery High School. "... We need to stop making police something they're not." - <https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/schools/as-some-students-push-to-remove-school-police-some-adults-disagree/>

In closing, the PG county school board voted to keep the SRO program. A district-wide survey in PG county revealed that 82% of its 13,000 respondents think SROs are important or very important to maintaining a safe learning environment⁶. If the council has not conducted such a survey, I encourage it to do so. Finally, placing the broader SRO program in the context of police reform, I leave you with a quote from Cathy Spann, an activist who lives in North Minneapolis, “Why can’t I have police reform? Why can’t I have law and order? Why do I have to pick and choose? I should be able to have both”⁷.

⁶ <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/education/pgcps-school-board-vote-school-resource-officers/65-551556ee-53c7-4288-acf-255dc8b01b58>

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/minneapolis-police-shortage-violence-floyd/2020/11/12/642f741a-1a1d-11eb-befb-8864259bd2d8_story.html