

Jasmine Arias - Testimony in Support of Restorative Justice for FY 25 County Council Budget Hearing (April 8)

Hello members of the County Council, my name is Jasmine Arias and I am a sophomore at Northwood High School. I ask that you add money to the MCPS budget so that we can maintain current levels of funding for restorative justice coach stipends. I support restorative justice, or RJ, because it allows us to create a future with a better school climate. RJ can also shrink the school-to-prison pipeline because it is able to reduce suspensions and keep kids from getting arrested.

State data shows that last year, Black MCPS students were nearly five times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension or expulsion than white MCPS students.¹ The Office of Legislative Oversight also reported that Black children were twice as likely to be suspended or referred to juvenile services compared to their share of student enrollment.²

I also see that the school-to-prison pipeline is a problem at my specific school. A friend of mine was suspended multiple times within the same month. I think about what would happen if I were in her shoes. I wonder how I could build a relationship with my teachers or if I could keep my friends, if I kept getting kicked out of school. I wonder what kind of help I would receive so that I can catch up to my schoolwork, or if I would fall behind. And most of all, I wonder if I would even want to go to school and if I would want to learn anything at all.

I don't think I would.

If suspensions were effective at getting students to learn their lesson, then we wouldn't see the same student get suspended so frequently. Luckily, we know that restorative justice can help shrink the school-to-prison pipeline. First, RJ improves school culture because it focuses on improving relationships based on trust and better communication. RJ assists students in recognizing and regulating emotions, and emphasizes values of respect, kindness, and responsibility so that students and teachers can make better choices. These proactive, culture-building values help avoid problems before they begin.

If harm does occur, a trained RJ coach can help students understand the root causes of problems so that they do not happen again. Preliminary data shows that 81% of RJ service calls do not repeat the violation.³

Despite these promising results, RJ is at risk of being cut. You, the County Council, have the power to make things better for my friends, classmates, and ultimately, yourselves. We are the next generation of Montgomery County leaders and we need restorative justice to thrive. Please add more money to the MCPS budget so that we can maintain FY 24 RJ coach stipend funding. Thank you.

¹ *Suspensions By School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, Maryland State Department of Education.
<https://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20222023Student/2022-2023-MD-P-S-Suspensions-By-School-and-Major-Offense-Category-Out-of-School-Suspensions-and-Expulsions.pdf> (Nov. 2023)

² *Addressing Racial Inequity in the School to Prison Pipeline*, Office of Legislative Oversight.
https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Resources/Files/2023_reports/OLORReport2023-6.pdf (June 27, 2023)

³ *Restorative Justice Presentation to MCPS*
https://montgomerycountymd.granicus.com/Viewer.php?view_id=169&event_id=15985&meta_id=168023 (November 30, 2023)