

~~Confidential - Montgomery County~~
Daniel Conteh - Testimony in Support of Restorative Justice for FY 25 County Council

Budget Hearing (April 9)

Hello, members of the Montgomery County Board of Education. I'm Daniel Conteh, a Seneca Valley High School student, and I am a member of Young People for Progress. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you today. I'm requesting you all to add money to the MCPS' proposed budget to maintain FY 24 funding of current Restorative Justice Coaches and specialists for FY25.

In schools across the county, many students face unfair punishments without a chance to understand and learn from their mistakes. Without a chance to reflect on their actions, they're more likely to repeat them, leading to more serious consequences. That's why Restorative Justice is so important in our schools.

For example, a classmate of mine was outright suspended without being questioned due to a group of other students who attacked her, all stating she was provoking them and was "asking for it." Without this reflection period, the students who harmed her will likely repeat said actions because they don't understand why their actions were harmful. An RJ coach or specialist can help them make that realization. Mistakes that students make when they are young result in more disciplinary action, which will increase their chances of being arrested or funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline. We need Restorative Justice to stop cases like these from happening.

Restorative Justice addresses conflicts and focuses on communication and finding solutions that benefit everyone involved. It goes beyond just punishing students and helps them understand the impact of their actions and how to make things right. When Restorative Justice is implemented with fidelity, suspension rates decrease, and students, particularly Black students

who often face disproportionate discipline, are treated more fairly. In RJ focus schools, Black student suspensions dropped by 41%.¹

Rather than invest in such incredible results, we are facing cuts to the program. There is currently one stipended restorative justice coach at every school, who must work extracurricular hours on top of their full-time job. If their stipends are cut, as is currently proposed, it will be even harder for them to provide consistent support. The budget also proposes cutting the RJ specialists to just 6 full-time positions. Students would have even fewer opportunities to turn to a trusted adult for guidance and support when they make mistakes.

Investing in Restorative Justice Coaches for every school in our county is not just about addressing disciplinary issues; it's about investing in the future of our students and creating a more just and equitable learning environment for all. By providing students with the support they need to learn from their mistakes and grow into responsible individuals, we can foster a positive school culture that benefits our entire community. Please add more money to the MCPS budget so that we can maintain the current level of funding for restorative justice coaches and specialists. Thank you for considering this important proposal.

¹ *Restorative Justice Presentation to MCPS*
https://montgomerycountymd.granicus.com/Viewer.php?view_id=169&event_id=15985&meta_id=168023
(November 30, 2023)