

April 9, 2024

Young People for Progress' Testimony for Montgomery County Council's FY 25 Operating Budget Forum

Hello, my name is Amyra Hasan and I am a Campaign Organizer at Young People for Progress. YPP is an organization dedicated to building political power and civic engagement among youth under 35. I am also an alumni of Montgomery Blair High School, Argyle Middle School, and Veirs Mill Elementary School. I urge the County Council to add funding to the proposed MCPS budget, in order to maintain FY 24 funding for restorative justice coach stipends and 3 additional restorative justice specialists, not cut them.

MCPS has a problem with unfair school discipline, particularly for students of color. For example, my sister is a current sophomore at Kennedy High School. She came to class early and went to the bathroom, but returned after the bell rang. When she returned, the teacher refused to let her and other latecomers into the class, unless they called their parents. My sister was punished, despite the fact that she was not "tardy." Even if she was, was the lost instructional time worth it? Or the time that it would take to catch her up to the lesson? Rather than listen to her side of the story, she was already guilty. If she knew about restorative justice, or RJ, an RJ coach could have de-escalated the tension between the teacher, our mom, and my sister, which was never resolved. She lost class time and felt disrespected. This is just one example of many.

Restorative justice is a philosophy and culture shift towards a more positive and inclusive school culture. When used as an alternative to traditional, exclusionary forms of discipline, it can yield extraordinary outcomes. It works because trained RJ professionals can teach students the reasons why their actions were harmful, so they are less likely to do it again. This approach is why 81% of RJ service calls in the last school year did not repeat the violation.¹ Focus RJ schools have also benefited from a 41% decrease in Black student suspensions.² These impacts are a great start for a program that has only been implemented in the last two years.

Over the last couple of days, you've heard students and other community members who support RJ. It's also a top principal request. Yet, we're now considering a proposal to cut stipend funding for restorative justice coaches and some full-time restorative justice specialist positions. These cuts come at a time when most schools are in the early or reactive stages of RJ implementation. We understand that this is a challenging year, but we implore the Council to invest in the work that the County has already started, not divest from it. RJ is an evidence-based solution that works.

We all need help navigating complicated emotions and conflicts, especially students after a generation-defining pandemic. Students need to be guided towards progress, not punishment. That is why we urge you to add funding to the proposed MCPS budget, so that we can keep FY 24 funding for RJ coach stipends and RJ specialists.

¹ Restorative Justice Presentation to MCPS

https://montgomerycountymd.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=169&event_id=15985&meta_id=168023
(November 30, 2023)

² Ibid.