

Melissa Coretz Goemann
Silver Spring, MD

Testimony in Support of Bill 46-20 SRO Removal - February 4, 2021

My name is Melissa Coretz Goemann and I live in District 5. I am testifying in support of Bill 46-20, calling for the removal of School Resource Officers from Montgomery County Schools.

I am the Senior Policy Counsel for the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN), a nonprofit organization focused on youth justice. Our work is premised on the fundamental understanding that our youth justice systems are inextricably bound with the systemic and structural racism that define our society. Unfortunately, our nations' schools have become one of the key feeders of a disproportionate number of youth of color into the juvenile justice system in a phenomenon commonly known as the "school-to-prison pipeline." This problem is exacerbated by the growing number of police officers stationed in schools, in programs such as Montgomery County's School Resource Officer (SRO) program.

As the Montgomery County's Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) stated in their Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) Impact Statement on Bill 46-20, "A review of the research suggests that school-police partnerships, even those aligned with best practices, lead to higher arrest rates and may not offer the best investment for improving students' learning environments." Not only did the OLO find that schools with SROs have higher arrest rates than schools without SROs, but their research about the demographics of MCPS arrests found that Black students are over-represented in school-based arrests in the County, accounting for 47% of all arrests in MCPS schools even though they only account for 22% of MCPS enrollment.

We can and must do better for our children. Having police officers stationed in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon, not a practice written in stone. I grew up without a police presence in my public schools, as I'm sure many of you did as well. My principal, school counselors, and teachers served as educators in all senses of the word - meaning teaching students how to learn in a way that included how to behave appropriately. We can successfully return to that model, which resulted in far less criminalization of childhood conduct, if we look for a more holistic way to support our students. The three special appropriations to the Fiscal Year 2021 Operating Budget for the Montgomery County

Public Schools that the Council introduced is a good first step in this direction: \$750,000 for restorative justice training for MCEA school staff; \$406,000 for after-school youth support and engagement hubs; and \$312,455 for therapeutic recreation services for school-age youth.

The OLO found that Bill 46-20 is likely to enhance racial equity and social justice in Montgomery County by reducing school arrests in general and benefiting Black and Latinx students in particular, since they comprise the majority of students arrested on MCPS campuses. I hope that the Council will take the findings of the OLO's RESJ Impact Statement seriously and will act to reduce racial and ethnic arrest disparities in MCPS schools by eliminating the SRO program and working, instead, to promote several best practices to advance RESJ within public schools that OLO recommended. These include more funding for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers; expanding positive behavioral interventions and supports; and expanding restorative justice, social and emotional learning, and empathetic discipline programs.

There is a Jewish teaching that whoever saves a life, saves the world. I urge you to act to protect many children's futures by passing Bill 46-20.

Respectfully submitted,
Melissa Coretz Goemann