

Testimony in Support of Bill 46-20

Kay Henry

Burtonsville, MD 20866

As a mother of two special needs children and a former Montgomery County public school teacher, I'm pleading that you pass this bill and take School Resource Officers out of our schools. Many people are under the mistaken impression that putting more police officers in schools makes the schools safer, but evidence shows that this is not true. Putting more police officers in schools would actually put many children and teenagers in danger. I am terrified of what it would mean for my children. We should be using funds to put more counselors in schools instead. Howard County Board of Education just voted to suspend the School Resource Officers Program and will develop two school safety plans – including one without SROs. I am so disappointed that the Montgomery County Council's SRO Work Group has not truly researched alternatives to the SRO option.

Both my children have diagnoses related to emotional regulation and social awareness. Both of them can behave inappropriately. Teachers like me have extensive training in child development and strategies to deal with behavior challenges. Counselors have even more training in providing emotional support for children and teens. Police officers simply do not receive the same training and armed officers are not the people who should be responding to children having a hard time.

There have been horrifying examples of school resource officers abusing young people – including SROs in Maryland. We'd like to think things like this wouldn't happen in Montgomery County, but in 2020, Montgomery County Police Officers Kevin Christmon and Dionne Holliday repeatedly threatened a terrified 5-year-old child who walked away from class. These officers were not SROs, but they were Montgomery County Officers, and they traumatized this poor child. The police did nothing to report this incident to the County Council. The only reason we know about it is because the parent is suing and has body cam footage. It is reasonable

to wonder how many other interactions between young people and Montgomery County Police Officers have been abusive and/or traumatic.

My son actually had a terrifying experience with police that the Council would have no way of knowing about. When he was seven, he got very upset and ran off. Two officers found him, grabbed him, put him in the car, and told him if he couldn't remember his address, they would have to put him in a cell. They repeated this threat to me after he managed to direct them to my home. I've never met a teacher who would respond to a child who was overwhelmed by threatening to put him in a jail cell.

If a student is misbehaving, a teacher's commitment and responsibility is to doing what is best for that student and the other students in the class. Counselors and teachers care about *why* a child is having trouble. A police officer's first priority is establishing and maintaining order in a matter of minutes. In all my years of teaching, I can honestly say that I don't think there was a single time that a situation would have been improved by having a police officer involved.

If my children don't follow a teacher's direction, it is a problem that the teacher can solve gently and proactively. If my children don't follow a police officer's direction, they are breaking the law. When my autistic daughter is having a shutdown, she is truly incapable of following directions. She panics and freezes. Her panic is intensified if she fears that things will get worse. Just the presence of a police officer would terrify her. She can not *will* herself to feel or act differently. Her brain just works this way. And if my daughter doesn't comply with an officer's directions quickly, she won't just end up with a time out. My daughter will be a 9th grader in the fall, and I am extremely frightened about her having interactions with a highschool SRO any time one feels like getting involved.

Students with disabilities are disproportionately punished with the current systems, so there is good reason for me to fear that police could be called upon to deal with my children. As a teacher, I saw again and again that the vast majority of students referred to the principal's office were disabled and/or students of color. A study of Maryland schools found that 10.1% of students with disabilities received an out-of-school suspension or expulsion, compared with 3.6% of students without disabilities (Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and

Restorative Practices 2018). And there is ample evidence that police officers often do not handle encounters with disabled people well – about half of police shootings are committed against disabled people (Hause, M. & Melber, A. 2016).

Please don't force me to put my children in more danger. We should be able to trust that when we send our children to school, they will be guided by knowledgeable professionals who care about them. Investing in putting more counselors in schools is the best way to work toward that goal.