February 23, 2021

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Montgomery County Council on this important issue.

I am the Rev. Abhi Janamanchi (pronouns he/him), and I serve as senior minister of Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in Bethesda, MD. Cedar Lane is a progressive religious community committed to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, and practicing Dr. King’s vision of the beloved community where all are welcome and included.

I would like to thank councilmembers Will Jawando and Hans Riemer for their lead sponsorship of Bill 46-20 that would prohibit the use of county funds for the deployment of School Resource Officers (SROs) in our public schools.

Removing SROs from our public schools is necessary to provide and sustain a safe, supportive, healthy, and positive learning environment for all students.

There is no evidence that the presence of SROs in schools improves student safety, student educational outcomes, or student mental health. The presence of police shifts the focus from learning and supporting students to over-disciplining and criminalizing them. Students are removed from classes, subjected to physical restraint, interrogation, and other risks to their rights to education, due process, and equal treatment. These consequences disproportionately fall on the most vulnerable students.

Students of color are more likely to be referred to law enforcement, and more likely to be arrested at school. According the MD Dept. of Education’s Arrest data for the the 2018-19 school year, over 79% of students arrested at school in MCPS were Black or Latinx students.3 Black students are only 22% of the MCPS population, but they represented 45% of school-based arrests — even though data demonstrates that Black students do not misbehave any more than their peers.4 Only 12% of MCPS students have disabilities recognized with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), but they represented 25% of school-based arrests.
This early contact with the criminal legal system increases the likelihood that they will be caught up in the system as adults and perpetuate the school to prison pipeline.

We have before us an opportunity to make changes to the status quo and envision the County that we can become. We need a complete realignment of funding and policy priorities for schools that includes a divestment of resources from the criminalization infrastructure and an investment in teaching, counseling, and student support services.

I urge you to vote in favor of Bill 46-20 and eliminate the continued placement of Student Resource Officers in Montgomery County Public schools and put those resources where they are truly needed – to restorative justice training, conflict resolution programs, student support and mental health services.

Sincerely,

Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, Senior Minister