

William Luther Jett
Washington Grove, MD

Council Council Hearing for the Pro-School Resource Officer Bill (Bill 7-21)

My name is Luther Jett, and I live in Washington Grove. I am submitting this written statement in opposition to Bill 7-21, presently before the Council. I am a retired Special Educator. I worked for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) for over 35 years, most of that time as a staff trainer and resource for the Department of Special Education.

As part of our regular staff development program, the Department of Special Education provided on-going training in Nonviolent Crisis Management for staff, professional, para-professional, and supporting services. I was part of a team which developed special guidelines for crisis intervention with students with significant cognitive disabilities and students with autism spectrum disorders.

Intervening when a student of any age, or any ability level, is in crisis and engaging in dangerous behaviors is always a fraught situation. Always. We put our focus on de-escalation, knowing that when force is met with force, situations can rapidly spiral out of hand. During every Crisis Management training, we made sure to explain the role of police officers, because there is a tendency, when students become violently out-of-control to consider calling in the police. Once you do that, we warned our staff, you no longer have a say in what happens. The police call the shots. If they decide to forcibly restrain the student, put handcuffs on the child, or arrest the child. You have no power. You might be the special educator working with the student, you might even be the school Principal, but once you have called in police officers, you are no longer in charge of that student. They are.

Police intervention in schools should be the last resort, not the first. And maintaining a standing police presence in schools is not only unnecessary, it could exacerbate tensions. MCPS has staff with the training and resources to manage and de-escalate most crisis situations. Ongoing and expanded training in those skills should be undertaken as schools open up. It is important to ensure that classroom staff, as well as school counselors, administrators, resource specialists, and security staff are involved in this training and that sensitivity training related to the unique needs of students with disabilities is part of that effort.

Based on my own experiences, and my understanding of research-driven best practices, I believe it is time to reconsider the deployment of School Resource Officers in our neighborhood schools. Therefore I cannot support Bill 721. I have come to this conclusion not only out of concern for the students I once served, but also in recognition of the extent to which disciplinary interventions have been disproportionately applied to individuals of color, with or without disabilities. Removing school safety officers from our county schools, when accompanied with appropriate training in non-confrontational de-escalation procedures, will lead to safer schools and will allow our MCPS staff to continue to build a more positive school climate for all.

Respectfully,
William Luther Jett