

Dear Council President Katz and County Council Members,

The first priorities of government are public safety and public education, and without public safety, public education suffers – we all know that students cannot learn in an unsafe school environment.

My name is Susan Burkinshaw. Many of you know that I have been a proponent of the School Resource Officer (SRO) Program since I became involved with Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA) and became an advocate for public safety and school safety and security in 2008. I am one of the authors of the 2010 MCCPTA SRO Resolution that equitably resolved to have an SRO in each high school in MCPS so all schools would enjoy the benefits of the program equally.

I am here today to enthusiastically support Bill 7-21 while wholeheartedly cautioning you against any reduction in the SRO program without proven data against it – please do not be influenced by the political bias and anecdotal evidence against it that is just not supported by the reality here in Montgomery County. The liability potential for the county is very real if you eliminate this program without due cause.

I would further assert that **the need for mental health interventions and supports is undeniably great – yet it is not mutually exclusive of the county's SRO program.** Both are needed, especially following our collective national and global experience in 2020. Moreover, eliminating the SRO program before or shortly after most students return to school after a year of virtual learning could be catastrophic.

If you DO eliminate this best-practice program now and something tragic happens, the cost of recovery from the trauma of a school tragedy, both in dollars and emotions, will be incalculable. One Maryland county is waiting for the state to make its decision on SRO bills, likely to avoid liability from deciding to remove the program itself.

The SRO program is a best practice in community policing. It supports efficiencies for the police department, for school administration, and for students, their families and the surrounding school neighborhoods. SROs allow access to a police officer dedicated to the school buildings to address reporting and provide continuity for investigations not afforded by beat officers and their disparate shift schedules (as compared to daily school schedules). Calls for service are also significantly reduced by having a dedicated SRO in a school building.

Some students may be afraid to go to school because of the SROs, but there are also a lot of students equally afraid to come to school without an SRO because of the real threat of violence or mass casualty – this week in Arkansas, on their first day back to in-person instruction, there was a school shooting where a student was killed. There must be a balance, and the data in Montgomery County supports the efficacy of our SRO program.

When data is adjusted to reflect individual school populations and disaggregated, the bias against minorities becomes less statistically significant, and it becomes clear that there is less of a problem statistically in Montgomery County than opponents of the SRO program would have you believe. In fact, an individual officer with direct contact daily with literally thousands of MCPS students and staff is a huge bang for our police buck, particularly give how small our police department is per capita. Also, statistics on the number of arrests made in Montgomery County in 2018-9: 163 - across a total student population of 162,680, or 0.1% - is negligible. Of those 163, only 60 were physical arrests, and 103 were paper arrests, or officer referrals to the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS).

Also, of note is that there were only 163 arrests for a total reported 2946 arrestable incidents in Montgomery County – only 5.5% of the total arrests that there could have been. If you look at the 60 physical arrests over the total arrestable incidents that arrest rate drops to 2%. If you look at that same number of arrests as compared to total student population and the number of days the kids are in school, the number of arrests is negligible. If you remove SROs, the number of arrests by law enforcement officers in the community will increase significantly, since they do not have the training of SROs or established relationships with the student.

Since reported incidents are down historically across the county by 40% from 2001-2002 to 2010-2011 subsequent to the implementation of the SRO program and down another 30% by the end of the 2018-19 school year (a total of 136,832 students were enrolled in MCPS during the 2001-02 school year and 7,104 serious incidents were reported; in the 2010-11 school year, with 144,064 students enrolled, 4,475 serious incidents were reported; In 2018-9, the most recent reported year, there were 162,680 students and 3,447 [pending confirmation] serious incidents, down another 30%), and most arrests are driven by MCPS administrators, **there is currently no statistically significant data against the SRO Program in Montgomery County.**

It is a myth that the SRO program fuels the school-to-prison pipeline when implemented properly, as it is here in Montgomery County, MD. The 2016 OLO report repeatedly cited against the SRO program states “...OLO finds the School-to-Prison Pipeline within the county mirrors national trends...but is relatively small and shrinking.” (“The School-to Prison Pipeline in Montgomery County”, p.96, 2016) The 2011-2015 data interpreted in this report is outdated and is being grossly misrepresented, underscoring the need for new data before disbanding the program.

The debate about eliminating the SRO program has stemmed from political unrest and the resulting anti-police sentiment nationally without looking at facts and hard data from right here in Montgomery County and drilling down into the OLO report. The real question is, are minority students being targeted? If so, that should also be a question for the Board of Education and MCPS administration, not the SRO program. Ninety-seven percent of SRO arrests were initiated by school administrators. Scholarly research has shown no causation between exclusionary discipline and SROs in schools, but more research is necessary (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016). Eliminating the SRO program without hard evidence against it is extremely shortsighted and dangerous. Relationships between SROs and the students they have mentored have kept Montgomery County minority students out of trouble – from a real-life student who credits his SRO with keeping him out of trouble, from his 5th grade D.A.R.E. program through his high school experience in MCPS – but there are no statistics on that.

Please do not turn a blind eye to the fact that **the MCPS principals have unanimously come out in support of the SRO Program – they are the ones who rely on these officers in their school buildings to keep their staff and students safe every day and they can attest to the benefits directly.** As a community member I am comforted knowing that there is an officer in the school building a quarter mile from my home to keep students safe from both internal and external threats, while allowing the rest of the department to patrol the community and provide backup for the SRO as needed – with upwards of 3,000 students and staff in many of our high schools on a normal school day. This is an extremely efficient use of police resources and tax dollars.

These county resource benefits are compounded by the added benefit to students of:

- SROs maintaining positive relationships and contact with students,
- participating in Restorative Justice Circles,
- providing wellness checks and mental health EAP for students in crisis,
- leading school drills, and
- a myriad of other functions they perform daily for the benefit of all students.

It should also be emphasized that **our county's SROs are a majority minority** – there are 26 total SROs in the program with demographic composition as follows: 10 Black males, 5 Black females, 1 Hispanic male, 8 White males, and 2 White females. If you speak to these officers directly you will find out that they are officers in the program because they want to help students – not to arrest them for no reason.

You know that the **Maryland Safe to Learn Act of 2018 was unanimously passed in support of standardizing SRO Programs across the state, and mandates every public high school have a school resource officer assigned to it.** There has not yet been time to analyze the data from the benefits of the increased, standardized training across the state. Removal of the program without that data would be incredibly irresponsible on such a tight timeline – due to the COVID-19 pandemic there is no current data to report on. I would argue that “adequate local law enforcement coverage” from untrained beat officers will result in more arrests, more calls for service, and more danger to the community as multiple officers, untrained in social-emotional issues and restorative justice (as compared to SROs), respond to schools.

Vocal support for the SRO program is generally much quieter than the knee-jerk politically motivated attacks against it have been. Many students and families, minority or otherwise, who have the most potential to directly benefit from the prevention and intervention methodologies provided by the SRO program (i.e., those being recruited into gangs, such as MS-13; those whose suicide was prevented by an SRO; or those who are victims of domestic abuse) might be less likely to testify in favor of the program because of the sensitivity of their individual circumstances. Add to that the prevention and intervention benefits that cannot be measured (since there is never statistical data on incidents that did not occur and/or were diffused because of the presence of an SRO), it would be irresponsible of the Board of Education and/or the County Council to eliminate the SRO program without concrete evidence against it.

Furthermore, outside threats are real and have occurred even here in Montgomery County. My boys were at Northwest High School in Germantown, MD when there were bomb threats against both it and Northwood High School on April 29, 2014 – there was an officer in the building to help investigate the threat while backup was called in from across the region and 2,000+ students and staff were evacuated safely. On May 5, 2014, the next week, there was another bomb threat against Northwest High School. Furthermore, my oldest, who graduated from MCPS in 2018, had the benefit of the SAME SRO FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL (sadly caused by the reduction of the program across the county when it was eliminated from middle schools and the middle school officer was reassigned). Yet that afforded his cohort the benefit of solid relationships with the SRO in high school and a much safer school environment. There was a noticeable uptick in serious incidents after the matriculating middle schoolers who did not have SROs in middle school arrived at the high school when my oldest was a senior. Please pay attention to those advocating for the program who have many years of experience with the SRO Program and have had kids in MCPS high schools, including those authoring Bill 7-21. We have personally witnessed the benefits of having an SRO assigned to each school/cluster over the years.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE - I caution you that the SRO program must not be reduced or eliminated until such time that we have those additional mental health resources in place, AND/OR we have concrete evidence that explicitly supports any potential benefit of reducing or eliminating it. As stated in this bill, President Obama's 2013 Plan to Reduce Gun Violence identifies the need for both law enforcement and mental health professionals. Until we have hard data in Montgomery County against the SRO program, there is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. If there are problems with bias against minority students in our school system, or the greater community concern of police targeting minorities on the streets, we need to address those issues specifically. Until it is proven that this bias is caused by the SRO Programs, this best practice must not be eliminated.

The SRO program and school incident data in Montgomery County clearly demonstrates a reduction in the number of serious incidents, it is unanimously supported by MCPS principals and it is a proven best practice in community policing nationally.

The numbers don't lie, and MCPS School Safety and Security data proves the SRO program works here in Montgomery County, Maryland and in Montgomery County Public Schools – a 51% decrease in the number of serious incidents annually in MCPS with a student population increase of 19% since the inception of the program should speak for itself.

BOTH MCPS data AND the OLO report prove the SRO program is working here.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Burkinshaw
Germantown, MD

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.
– Benjamin Franklin