



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

March 29, 2021

The Honorable Brenda Wolff
President
Montgomery County Board of Education
850 Hungerford Drive, Room 123
Rockville, Maryland 20850

President Wolff and Members of the Board of Education:

On behalf of the Montgomery County Commission on Children and Youth, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the current assessment of the School Resource Officer (SRO) program in Montgomery County Public Schools. The Commission on Children and Youth is comprised of 15 committed volunteer members including high school youth, parents, and child-serving professionals, who promote the well-being of Montgomery County's children, youth, and families so that all young people may realize their full potential and become contributing, productive adults.

This commission year, one of our priority areas is examining how to strengthen the relationship between youth and law enforcement. As a result of the recent concerns regarding the poor interactions between secondary school-aged students of color and the School Resource Officer (SRO), the Commission on Children and Youth seeks to analyze and review the major components and effectiveness of the SRO training program. In our analysis, we've noticed that a key stakeholder-interest group is missing in the discussion: youth with disabilities.

According to slides in the January 12, 2021, MCPS presentation to the Board of Education entitled *Request for Student Arrest Data and the School Resource Officer Program (Findings and Recommendations)*, the SRO workgroup includes representatives from various organizations within the county, and also within the MCPS community, such as the NAACP Parents' Council, the Asian-American / Pacific Islander Student Achievement Action Group, the Latino Student Achievement Action Group, and the African American Student Achievement Action Group. While we applaud this diverse representation, missing is any organization specifically devoted to serving or representing students with disabilities and/or their families. This lack of representation is extremely concerning and needs to be addressed.

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Thus, for the reasons explained below, we recommend the following in connection with the ongoing assessment of the MCPS SRO program:

1. A representative of students with disabilities, such as a current or former Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) co-chair or member, or MCCPTA Special Education Committee representative, be included in the workgroup;
2. Ensure that the community outreach requested by the Board of Education about the SRO program includes parents of students with disabilities and, when appropriate, students with disabilities themselves; and
3. Specific data be collected, when possible, to better understand whether or not: (a) a bias similar to that discussed in the 2018 GAO report referenced below is also reflected in SRO interactions with students with disabilities, including but not limited to arrest data; and (b) whether outcomes involving law enforcement, including SROs, are better when law enforcement knows the disabled youth (and their disability), and if so, whether that can be achieved by specific law enforcement being assigned to groups of schools, which appears to be the proposed alternative to SROs in schools.

An essential aspect of the MCPS SRO program review is the SRO Workgroup. Because the group's work is ongoing, we recommend a representative of students with disabilities, such as a current or former Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) member, a MCCPTA Special Education Committee representative, or local organization that supports students be included in the workgroup as soon as possible.

Also, it is our understanding that the Board of Education has requested outreach to the community to gather views on SROs and the SRO program. We recommend outreach efforts be made to include parents of students with disabilities and, when appropriate, students with disabilities. As demonstrated below, it is clear the issues surrounding the interaction between school administrators, law enforcement and youth with disabilities are complex. Thus, we also recommend data be collected to better understand: (1) if a bias similar to that discussed in the 2018 GAO report below is reflected in SRO interactions and arrests with students with disabilities, and (2) if interactions involving SROs are better when there is a personal connection or increased knowledge/training of students with disabilities, **and if so, whether that can be achieved by specific law enforcement being assigned to groups of schools, which appears to be the proposed alternative to SROs in schools.**

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The Commission's recommendations have important and complex context that underscores the importance of including students with disabilities and their experiences when considering the future of the MCPS SRO program. One piece of important context involves school discipline and students with disabilities. According to a 2018 GAO report, students with disabilities disproportionately receive harsher discipline than their non-disabled peers by over 13% points. The full GAO report can be found here: <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-258>.

While school discipline is important, also important is how SROs interact with students with disabilities. Given that SROs are law enforcement, it is important to understand the troubling history of law enforcement interactions with people with disabilities. Americans with disabilities are more likely to have unnecessarily violent, and even lethal, interactions with law enforcement than non-disabled peers. "While specific details vary by case . . . [l]aw enforcement officials expect and demand compliance, but when they don't recognize a person's disability in the course of an interaction, the consequences can be tragic. Misconceptions or assumptions can lead to overreactions that culminate in unnecessary arrest, use of pepper spray, or individuals being tasered." The Atlantic 21014 Report on 2014 US Senate Hearing.

https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/05/misunderstanding-disability-leads-to-police-violence/361786/?gclid=Cj0KCCQiAqdP9BRDVARIsAGSZ8AIBUZxnXRu1cEQgnAAg62VX58ghmaOQ1HF BdgIEBZC_fV1EDYnwN1EaAi7TEALw_wcB

Far more chilling, according to NAMI Illinois: "Almost half of the people who die at the hands of police have some kind of disability, according to a new report, as officers are often drawn into emergencies where urgent care may be more appropriate than lethal force."

<https://namiillinois.org/half-people-killed-police-disability-report/>

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration. We look forward to implementation of a workgroup that is reflective of the needs of all the children and youth in our community.

Sincerely,



Renae McPherson, Chair

c: Dr. Jack Smith, Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools