

Education Advocacy Coalition for Students with Disabilities

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL 277: STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION—GUIDELINES ON TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

FEBRUARY 5, 2020

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Education Advocacy Coalition for Students with Disabilities (EAC), a coalition of more than 25 organizations and individuals concerned with education policy for students with disabilities in Maryland, strongly supports House Bill 277, which would create a trauma-informed schools initiative within the Maryland State Department of Education, develop guidelines to assist schools in developing a trauma-informed approach to meeting the needs of students and staff, create a trauma informed schools expansion program and set up a fund for the program.

According to the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, a website with resources about trauma informed care in schools, one out of every four children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior. Trauma can include situations such as abuse, abandonment, neglect, serious accidents, bullying, witnessing violence, or living in chronically chaotic environments in which housing and financial resources are not consistently available. In a trauma-informed school, the goal is to provide tools to the adults in the school community to address trauma, and to create an underlying culture of respect and support. <https://traumaawareschools.org/traumainschools> (February 26, 2018).

The benefits of implementing trauma informed care in Maryland schools cannot be overstated. Contrary to the notion of school as a supportive and nurturing environment, for example, during the 2015-16 school year, there were 2761 school-related arrests in Maryland. Several jurisdictions had particularly high arrest numbers: Baltimore County with 393 arrests, Washington County with 249, Prince George's County with 588, Montgomery County with 304, and St. Mary's with 186.

In addition to arrest and discipline work, EAC members represent students and work with families whose children have been subjected to the use of restraint and seclusion. Many of the students who have been restrained or placed in seclusion are students who have sustained trauma; the use of restraint or seclusion induces additional trauma. For these students, school becomes not a refuge and a place to learn, but a place to fear. Senate Bill, codified in July, 2017, required the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to collect data regarding the use of restraint and seclusion in the state's school districts and nonpublic special education schools and report annually to the General Assembly. The numbers are greatly concerning. According to the December 1, 2019 report, for example, there were 1996 incidents of physical restraint in Frederick County and 1604 incidents of seclusion. Montgomery County reported 1356 incidents of restraint and 602 incidents of seclusion to MSDE. Calvert County, with a school enrollment of fewer than 16,000 students, reported 750 incidents of physical restraint and 386 incidents of seclusion. Harford County reported 1153 incidents of seclusion. Because of these numbers and because restraint and seclusion are used disproportionately with students with disabilities, the Maryland General Assembly included a provision in Senate Bill 786 requiring that the Maryland State

Department of Education define “trauma informed interventions” and that school systems report to the Department on the professional development provided to staff on topics including trauma informed interventions. Additionally, the Maryland Safe to Learn Act, enacted by the General Assembly in 2018, requires training for school resource officers regarding trauma and trauma informed interventions.

Passage of House Bill 277 would go a long way towards creating a more positive school climate for students, one that recognizes the strengths that students bring to school each day but that also recognizes the support they need and provides that support in a respectful and nurturing way. The EAC appreciates the multi-faceted approach of the bill; developing a program, requiring guidelines, setting parameters for expansion and creating a fund make this a comprehensive bill that, if enacted, will make schools a better place for all children and all staff. For these reasons, the EAC strongly supports House Bill 277.

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