

TESTIMONY AGAINST

Testimony to the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

In opposition to

Senate Bill 583: Maryland Center for School Safety– Public Schools– Reporting of Classroom Disruptions

March 8, 2022

Strong Schools Maryland urges an unfavorable vote on Senate Bill 583: Maryland Center for School Safety– Public Schools– Reporting of Classroom Disruptions.

The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future envisions a world-class system of public schools for our state’s students. Critical to that world-class system is safe learning environments that allow teachers to teach and students to learn. The Blueprint acknowledges the importance of restorative practices as a means to create these safe environments that build a sense of belonging, safety, and social responsibility for everyone in the school community. However, not only does Senate Bill 583 not further the Blueprint’s vision, it creates unnecessary opportunities for a litany of issues to occur that are elaborated below.

Senate Bill 583:

- Does not add any additional safety concerns that are not already in place within schools, such as code of conduct policies and escalating disciplinary tactics;
- Requires already busy local superintendents and county boards—who are presently handling COVID-19 guidelines for schools in their county—to sort through and respond to anonymous tips within 45 days;
- Fails to detail how county superintendents and county boards are meant to investigate anonymous tips and lacks consideration for how the school day and students’ learning could be hindered if these reports are made by non-educators;
- Presents underlying equity issues, such as giving an opportunity for others to create unfounded claims against racially/ethnically diverse teachers, in a way that can be used to negatively impact inclusion and full participation of all people within the school; and
- Fails to consider that classroom disruptions could be a sign of many other things, some of which should be handled by mental health professionals rather than someone who is not familiar with the specific community or school.

Current Maryland disciplinary practices revolve around punitive or exclusionary discipline involving things such as suspensions and expulsions. However, not only does exclusionary discipline fail to accomplish any of the things that it was intended for, it actually increases behavioral issues and contributes towards negative educational outcomes for students including lower academic achievement, greater risk of dropping out, and lower graduation rates.¹ Punitive discipline also has a discriminatory impact on students of color and students with disabilities. In 2018, 60% of out-of-school suspensions in Maryland were Black students, despite the fact that Black students only made up 35% of student enrollment.² Recently, restorative practices have been introduced and implemented as a successful

¹ Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices, 2018, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5339/000113/023600/023694/20190078e.pdf>

² Gail L. Sunderman et al., High Suspending Schools in Maryland: Where are They Located and Who Attends Them?, 2018, https://education.umd.edu/sites/education.umd.edu/files/MEP_Out-of-School%20Suspensions2_Oct%202018_0.pdf

alternative, as evidenced by findings from implementation of restorative practices in other states. Maryland also has several districts implementing restorative practices within their schools with promising results. In Montgomery, pilot schools that implemented a restorative justice program reported a 70% decline in office referrals for misconduct.³ After Baltimore City Schools implemented restorative practices in their pilot schools, suspensions fell by 44% in one school year.⁴

There is a growing body of research that supports the promising and powerful impact of restorative practices in Maryland schools. However, successful restorative practice programs require funding in order to train and coach educators in building positive school culture and strong relationships with students at the outset. Rather than paying for a system that has shown to not be beneficial, the \$65,781 in general state expenditures calculated in the fiscal and policy note could be better used to support implementation of restorative practice programs, training and coaching for educators, and program evaluation in schools.

Environments that are safe and conducive for teaching and learning are imperative for the world-class education system that the Blueprint envisions for Maryland. While the Blueprint seeks to move forward with restorative practices, the passing of SB583 would only serve to hinder this progress by continuing the pattern of punitive discipline. The General Assembly must abandon the tradition of treating students like they do not belong in the classroom and lead Maryland forward into a world-class education system that is for all students. We therefore respectfully urge an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 583.

If you have questions or requests for additional information, you can email:

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³ Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices, 2018, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5339/000113/023600/023694/20190078e.pdf>

⁴ Deborah T. Eisenberg et al., Restorative Practices in Baltimore City Schools: Research Updates and Implementation Guide, 2020

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