



September 16, 2020

Prince George's County Public Schools Board of Education Office
Sasser Administration Building
14201 School Lane
Upper Marlboro, MD 20772
Tel. (301) 952-6115

Via E-Mail

RE: REMOVING POLICE FROM SCHOOLS IS NECESSARY TO PROTECT BLACK AND BROWN CHILDREN FROM FURTHER HARM

Dear Board Members:

We write on behalf of Advancement Project National Office to fully and enthusiastically support the call to remove police from Prince George's County public schools. If we have learned anything from this historic moment spurred by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, it is that police cannot be trusted to keep us safe. Years of Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) data reflecting a relentless school-to-prison pipeline indicate disparate criminalization of students of color by the police. Officers that roam school hallways are no different from the officers on the streets and thus, a new vision for safety in schools must emerge from this crisis. Over the past summer, school boards in Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, Oakland, Portland, and many other cities, have all taken historic action to remove police from schools, demonstrating that a police-free schools future is both possible and necessary to protect the safety and humanity of Black and Brown children.¹ The time to act is now – and the board must vote to fully defund the School Resource Officer (SRO) program and finally provide students with police-free schools that educate them, not criminalize them.

Our organization has spent the last few years highlighting the need for police free schools across the country, because we believe that in order for our nation's students to truly thrive, their educational and socio-emotional needs must be met by those most qualified to meet those needs, like counselors, psychologists, and social workers. We already know that investment in law enforcement personnel fundamentally fails to make schools safer for students.² Instead of spending taxpayer money to police Prince George's County children, those funds should be reallocated towards counseling services, mental health supports, positive behavioral interventions, restorative

¹ Moriah Balingit, Kim Bellware, Valerie Strauss, *Fueled by Protests, School Districts Across the Country Cut Ties with Police*, The Washington Post (June 12, 2020) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/06/12/schools-police-george-floyd-protests/>.

² Matthew Glowicki, *Police officer uses stun gun on Jeffersontown student who assaulted cop, officials say*, Louisville Courier-Journal (Nov. 1, 2017), <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/crime/2017/11/01/police-officer-uses-stun-gun-jeffersontown-student-who-assaulted-cop-officials-say/822783001/>.



justice programs, and other methods that have been proven to create holistically beneficial learning environments for young people. These commitments to resources are especially important for youth returning to school after isolation and the traumas inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For 20 years, Advancement Project, a national racial justice organization, has pioneered efforts to end the school-to-prison pipeline. We have worked with grassroots organizations across the country for years in this fight, including in the DMV – and have been proud to support them in the progress they have made in their school districts. Unfortunately, despite some progress in recent years, the school-to-prison pipeline persists, and it is clear that we need a new vision of police free schools not just in Prince George’s County, but across the country.

The proliferation of law enforcement in our nation’s schools is a pressing and alarming issue that our organization has worked tirelessly to combat. To this end, we released a joint report with the Alliance for Educational Justice in 2018 titled “We Came to Learn: A Call to Action for Police Free Schools,” which chronicles the violent history of school policing in the United States and the on-going harms that students, particularly Black & Brown, LGBTQ, and differently-abled students face at the hands of school police officers.³

We know that the mere presence of police in schools serves to reinforce and accelerate the school to prison pipeline, and this is borne out by the data. According to the most recent data released by the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2015-2016 academic year, Black students represented 15% of enrollment in public schools across the country, yet they accounted for 31% of students who were referred to law enforcement or arrested.⁴ Research shows that higher discipline rates for students of color are not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but instead due to systemic racism.⁵ A March 2018 report from the Government Accountability Office confirms this fact; the study concluded that stark disparities persist in the administration of discipline for Black students and students with disabilities across the country.⁶

In Prince George’s County, these disparities also exist – Black boys and girls are disproportionately disciplined compared to other groups in their schools. Even though Black students make up about 55% of the total school enrollment in PGCPSS, they represent over 76.6% of the students suspended or expelled in the 2017-18 school year.⁷ **Police in schools exacerbate these problems. Of the 311 total arrests in PGCPSS in 2018-2019, the vast majority, 270 or**

³ See <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.

⁴ U.S. Dep’t of Ed., 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate and Safety, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>.

⁵ Russel J. Skiba and Natasha T. Williams, *Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts About Racial Differences In Behavior: A Summary of the Literature*, Indiana University (Mar. 2014), https://indrc.indiana.edu/tools-resources/pdf-disciplineseries/african_american_differential_behavior_031214.pdf.

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *K-12 EDUCATION: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities* (Mar. 22, 2018), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-258>.

⁷ Maryland State Department of Education, *Suspensions, Expulsions, and Health Related Exclusions 2017-2018*,” Table 3 (Sept. 2018), <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20172018Student/2018SuspExpulHRExc.pdf>.



86.8%, were Black students.⁸ PGCPS reports calling the police for a significant number of situations including “fighting,” “drugs,” and “disruption.”⁹ Many of these situations are those which social workers, restorative justice facilitators, counselors, and other non-law enforcement professionals are better equipped to effectively and safely address.

Opponents of police-free schools claim that police are needed in schools in order to keep students safe – despite no clear evidence that they do. In fact, there is no conclusive evidence that the presence of police in schools reduces student crime, nor that they prevent mass shootings.¹⁰ There are studies, however, showing that schools with SROs have higher rates of exclusionary school discipline and higher rates of arrests for vague offenses like disorderly conduct.¹¹ It is clear from the PGCPS data that these outcomes also exist in Prince George’s County.

The existing racial disparities in PGCPS must be contextualized within the backdrop of rampant police violence—amidst a global pandemic—in response to protests of police brutality. In this time of national civil unrest, we cannot continue to operate our schools and live in our communities as if things will just “go back to normal.” We know firsthand that “normal” for communities of color has always been suspensions, expulsions, the school to prison pipeline, and the under-resourcing of public schools. We can no longer be satisfied with “normal.” It is time to actually listen to what Black and Brown youth—who routinely experience police violence in school—have been saying for years: Being forced to interact with a system of policing that views them as threats and not as students, is detrimental to their sense of safety in school. Young people should not have to fear being assaulted, arrested, or killed by a police officer, every single time they show up to school to learn. There is no way that a policing culture that allows for the brutality we all witnessed can co-exist with the nurturing culture that students need to thrive.

We urge you as a School Board to use your power to defund the SRO program at PGCPS. Additionally, we urge you to prioritize the health and well-being of Prince George’s County students by ensuring that there are plentiful supports available to them both academically and socio-emotionally. Many organizations have been pushing for school districts to prioritize real school safety for years—which includes providing more mental health resources, more counselors and more mentors. In the wake of the Newtown, CT, and Parkland, FL, school shootings, organizations urged that more psychologists, therapists, counselors, social workers, and nurses be placed at every school in order to best respond to the social and emotional needs and well-being of students.¹² We know that for many young people, school is the only place where they can access mental health counseling and support. As this pandemic continues, we are already seeing school

⁸ Maryland State Department of Education, *Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data: School Year 2018-2019*, <http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/StudentArrest/MarylandPublicSchoolsArrestDataSY20182019.pdf>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Aaron Kupchik, *Researching the Impact of School Policing*, End Zero Tolerance (Jul. 31, 2020), <https://www.endzerotolerance.org/single-post/2019/03/11/Research-on-the-Impact-of-School-Policing>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Advancement Project, Dignity in Schools, Alliance for Educational Justice, and LDF, *Police in Schools are Not the Answer to School Shootings* (Mar. 2018), <https://advancementproject.org/resources/police-schools-not-answer-school-shootings/>.



districts either making or anticipating significant cuts as a result of budget shortfalls.¹³ We cannot ignore the needs of students and remove the vital support needed for their growth and development – especially given that the mental health effects of this pandemic will be felt for years to come. Eliminating the SRO program at PGCPS will allow for resources to be reallocated to the supports that students truly need.

In this time of crisis, we all have the responsibility to care for and support our most vulnerable communities. Young people and their concerns are often left out of decision-making efforts, despite their being the ones most directly affected by changes in the education system. We need to support the wellbeing of our students by investing in the resources that will truly guide them through to adulthood. Eliminating the SRO program at PGCPS is a crucial first step towards that goal. If you have any questions, please reach out to Jessica Alcantara, Staff Attorney, at jalcantara@advancementproject.org, or to Maria Fernandez, Senior Campaigns Strategist, at mfernandez@advancementproject.org. We believe that providing police-free schools and investing in real student supports is what it will take to ensure our young people are safe, healthy, and thriving in their schools and communities during and after this crisis.

Sincerely,

Judith Browne Dianis
Executive Director
Advancement Project National Office

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| CC: | Dr. Alvin Thornton Chair | Edward Burroughs III Vice Chair District 8 |
| | David Murray District 1 | Joshua M. Thomas District 2 |
| | Pamela Boozer-Strother District 3 | Bryan Swann District 4 |
| | Raaheela Ahmed | Belinda Queen |

¹³ Alex Zimmerman and Christina Veiga, *De Blasio proposes over \$221 million in NYC education cuts, including pre-K and school budgets*, Chalkbeat New York (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2020/04/07/budget-cut-tk/>; Max Larkin, *In Randolph, Officials Cited Coronavirus As They Made State's First Cuts to School Staff*, WBUR (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://www.wbur.org/edify/2020/04/15/randolph-school-furloughs>; Chris Jones and Nadia Pflaum, *Utah schools could lose up to \$30 million in coronavirus budget cuts*, KUTV (Apr. 13, 2020), <https://kutv.com/news/beyond-the-books/coronavirus-leading-to-cuts-in-utah-school-funding>.



District 5

K. Alexander Wallace
District 7

D. Paul Monteiro, Jr.
Appointed

Curtis Valentine, M.P.P.
Appointed

District 6

Sonya Williams
District 9

Sandra D. Shephard
Appointed

Ninah Jackson
Student Member of the Board