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**Comments to the Prince George’s County Board of Education –
June 11, 2020**

RE: Removal of school resource officers from Prince George’s County Public Schools

We write from the Prince George’s County Office of the Public Defender’s Juvenile Defense Division, and we stand in strong support of the resolution to remove School Resource Officers (SROs) from Prince George’s County Public Schools (PGCPS). That is because we understand that police do not make us safe; instead, investment in counselors, restorative justice, and positive behavior interventions are what build capacity in children and our communities.

In our work as juvenile public defenders, we work every day with children charged in juvenile and adult court, oftentimes for incidents that take place in school. Among the most populous jurisdictions in Maryland, Prince George’s County is an unfortunate leader in school based arrests. During the 2017-2018 school year, there were 350 school based arrests in Prince George’s County, compared to 226 in Montgomery County and only 60 school based arrests in Baltimore City.¹ In PGCPS all of the arrests were made by SROs, and thirty-one percent of these arrests were for non-violent offenses²: theft, possession of controlled substances, and even disruption. It is not lost on us that Black students bear the burden of the over-policing of our schools: in a school district that is 55 percent black, 301 of the school based arrests in 2017-2018 school year, or 86 percent, were of Black students. One-third of those arrests were referred to the Department of Juvenile Services for prosecution.³ In the past year, our office has represented over 30 young people charged in juvenile and adult court for incidents in Prince George’s County Public Schools.

As we see every day in our work, the presence of SROs directly impacts the school to prison pipeline, easily funneling Black students into the criminal legal system. Just like teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers, individuals who work as SROs can play a positive role in students’ lives through mentorship, coaching, and relationship building. But the reality we hear from our clients is that the mere presence of an armed, uniformed officer changes the learning setting and escalates simple disagreements, contributing to a culture of criminalization and antagonism in schools. Moreover, “the use of SROs is linked to increased rates of exclusionary discipline and the criminalization of relatively trivial student behavior. . . . SROs are not trained as educators, but as sworn law enforcement officers with the authority to arrest

¹ Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data: School Year 2017-2018 at 6. Available at

<http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/StudentArrest/MarylandPublicSchoolsArrestDataSY20172018.pdf>

² *Id.* at 143.

³ *Id.* at 94.

people.”⁴ Even when an arrest does not result in a court case the experience of being policed in school can fundamentally change how a young person views themselves and experiences in education going forward.

The notion that SROs are mandatory to keep our schools safe is simply untrue. PGCPS has a robust school security apparatus in place, and the removal of armed police officers from our schools does not disrupt it. In Fiscal Year 2021, PGCPS has chosen to invest \$17 million in school security, separate and apart from SROs, which are funded by multiple police departments themselves.⁵ In fact, PGCPS has chosen to invest \$1 million of those funds for thirteen new school security staff in our middle schools, for children as young as eleven years old. These security staff range from security assistants to investigative counselors, who do have the power to arrest students. To say that removal of armed SROs who are not placed at every school throughout our district renders all schools unsafe is quite simply fear mongering and flies in the face of the broad security apparatus that is presently in place. Under the Maryland Safe to Learn Act of 2018, PGCPS can still ensure that there is “adequate local law enforcement coverage” able to respond to a school in the case of an emergency, without having an armed officer in the school.

Finally, we note that the movement to remove armed police officers from our schools comes at a time when we are questioning as a nation the outsized and dangerous role of police in every day life, after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of the police. The issues of police brutality are close to home as well: in January of this year, Prince George’s County Police Officer Michael Owen shot and killed a handcuffed man in his police car⁶; in the beginning of June, three still unidentified Prince George’s County police officers were suspended after video surfaced of an officer kicking a handcuffed man.⁷ This is the same police department that selects and sends SROs to our schools. The notion that officers coming from this same department are equipped to provide a safe and secure environment for students to thrive and learn is incompatible with public evidence of excessive force by the police department.⁸

⁴ Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices, Final Report and Collaborative Action Plan, at 26. Available at <https://chaowu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/md-school-to-prison-pipeline-doc-2018.pdf>

⁵ Prince George’s County Public Schools, Chief Executive Officer’s FY2021 Proposed Annual Operating Budget at 235-237. https://www1.pgcps.org/uploadedFiles/Offices/Business_Management_Services/Budget/FY_2021_Budget_Development/FY21%20CEO%20PROPOSED%20FINALv2.pdf

⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/01/28/maryland-police-officer-fatally-shoots-man-handcuffed-cruiser/4595519002/>

⁷ <https://wtop.com/prince-georges-county/2020/06/3-prince-georges-county-police-officers-suspended-following-release-of-disturbing-video/>

⁸ Police Shootings: A Washington Post Investigation, WASHINGTON POST, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/content/nation/investigative/policeshootings.html>. Ruben Castaneda, Officer Liable in Student’s Killing, WASHINGTON POST, January 20, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/19/AR2006011902346.html>.; See also, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me, Part II (2015); See Prince George Memorandum of Agreement, DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2010/12/15/Prince_George_memo_agree.pdf

We cannot wait for a catastrophe at the hands of an armed police officer in our schools to make a change. By removing SROs from our schools, this Board can take the first important step in dismantling the school security apparatus, and reimagine schools without police. Together, we can create the safe schools our students deserve.

Signed,



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