



**Written Testimony of Tristin Brown, Associate Counsel,
Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs
Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole & Education
Concerning School Security in District of Columbia Public Schools**

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Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding the transition of the security contract from the Metropolitan Police Department (“MPD”) to DC Public Schools (“DCPS”). For more than fifty years, the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs has addressed issues of discrimination and racial injustice in a number of areas, including education, through litigation and policy advocacy. The issue of school safety in school is inexorably linked with racial justice: students of color too often bear the brunt of harsh, unnecessary policing in school that furthers the school-to-prison pipeline. The Washington Lawyers’ Committee applauds the Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education for moving the school security guard contract from MPD to DCPS; this move is an important step to reimagine school safety and ensure that students are not criminalized in school.

The Washington Lawyers’ Committee supports Black Swan Academy and other youth activists in calling for #PoliceFreeSchools. As the nation continues to confront a long overdue reckoning with the systemic racism that plagues many institutions, including policing, while simultaneously battling a public health crisis that has disproportionately impacted Black and Brown communities, it is clear that police in schools are not the solution to true public safety for our children. It is especially critical during such a fraught time in our nation’s history to take steps that prioritize the emotional, mental, and physical well-being of our youth. DCPS must embrace this opportunity to create an intentional school safety infrastructure that values a community-led approach, invests in staff, and treats student safety holistically.

Policing in Schools is More Harmful to Black Students, and Students with Disabilities Than Helpful

MPD’s role in patrolling schools has been both direct, through the School Safety Division and placement of school resource officers (SROs) in schools, and indirectly, through managing and training school security guards. The culture of policing stemming from MPD disproportionately and adversely impacts Black students.

The presence of police in schools perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline, and when police are in schools, Black students are more likely to be arrested. While Black students comprise two-thirds of the DCPS student population, 92% of school-based arrests for the 2018-2019 academic year were Black students.¹ On the national level, during the 2015-2016 academic year, Black

¹ Office of the State Superintendent of Education, “2019 DC School Report Card,” 2019.

students made up 15 % of the public school student population, but represented the 31% of students who were arrested or referred to law enforcement.²

Police in schools also disproportionately harms students with disabilities. In DC, students with disabilities accounted for 31% of school-based arrests during the 2018-2019 academic year.³ Data shows that in 2015-2016, students with disabilities accounted for 28% of the referrals to law enforcement despite making up 12% of the population of enrolled students.⁴ The probability of having an interaction with school police is even greater for Black students with disabilities. On the national scale, Black students with disabilities were over 2.5 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement compared to white students with disabilities.⁵

The policing and disciplining of youth disparately impacts Black youth because not only are they more prone to coming into contact with law enforcement, but law enforcement officials are more likely to view their typical teenage behavior as criminal.⁶ Unsurprisingly, law enforcement do not treat white students in the same manner. If the goal is to achieve genuine school safety, DCPS must consider alternative methods and modelsto school police. School police are both expensive and inefficient.⁷ Moreover, students don't feel safe when their school environments have a police presence.⁸ This fear stems from the countless incidents of students being physically assaulted and abused by SROs⁹ and the ongoing violence that police perpetuate against Black and Latinx communities. Our students deserve to be a part of educational environments that promote and foster respect, dignity, care, and safety of its students.

What Are Other Jurisdictions Doing?

Communities across the country have already been engaging in achieving authentic student safety by contemplating or creating police free schools and reinvesting resources in supportive services that create true school safety.

In 2016, Intermediate School District 287, a school district in Minnesota that serves students with social-emotional needs and learning disabilities, replaced its SROs with Student Safety

² 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>

³ Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "2019 DC School Report Card," 2019.

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 *See generally*, U.S. Dep't of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection 2015-16.

⁶ *See, e.g.*, Goff, P.A., Jackson, et.al. "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (February 2014); Epstein, Rebecca, Jamilia J. Black & Thalia Gonzalez. "Girlhood Interrupted: The erasure of Black Girls' Childhood," *Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality* (2017), available at <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>.

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⁸ Advancement Project, "We Came to Learn" at 32, <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/> (2018).

⁹ *Id.* at 69-70.

Coaches (SSCs).¹⁰ The staff are trained to engage in mental health, de-escalation, restorative justice, and safe physical interventions. District data shows that in the first year, the number of arrests at the pilot school went from 65 to 12. Currently, the district averages five arrests per year. While this model can be improved by completely eliminating the need to refer students to law enforcement, it is an example of how reimagining school security and safety is more effective and beneficial for students.

Oakland is another example of a community that has committed itself to police-free schools. Just this year, the Oakland School Board voted unanimously to pass the George Floyd Resolution to Eliminate the Oakland Schools Police Department. This huge feat, largely led by the Black Organizing Project¹¹, is expected to result in the elimination of the school police department and the redistribution of money to hire “more social workers, psychologists, or “restorative justice practitioners.”¹² Additionally, the school district is also expected to consult with students, parents, teachers, and the Black Organizing Project to create a new school safety plan.

In light of the brutal killing of George Floyd and a string of other incidents of deadly police violence, over fifty school districts have passed resolutions or policies supporting police-free schools. Some of those school districts include, Minneapolis (severing contract with the Minneapolis Police Department),¹³ Phoenix (terminating agreement with the Phoenix Police Department),¹⁴ and Denver (ending agreement with the Denver Police Department).¹⁵ We urge DCPS to take similar steps to reimagine school safety.

What Police-Free Schools in DCPS Can and Should Look Like

The concept of police-free schools doesn't end at the removal of police officers from schools. True school safety requires the funding and implementation of critical support services, like mental health support, peer mediators, and transformative justice programs, that foster safe environments in which students can flourish. DC must take this opportunity to reimagine school

¹⁰ Katie Reilly, “Oakland is Disbanding Its School Police Force as George Floyd’s Death Drives the Push for Police-Free Schools,” TIME (June 25, 2020), available at <https://time.com/5859452/oakland-school-police/>.

¹¹ <http://blackorganizingproject.org/>

¹² Erin Hinrichs, “No police in schools? This Minnesota district committed to an alternative four years ago,” MinnPost (June 25, 2020), available at <https://www.minnpost.com/education/2020/06/no-police-in-schools-this-minnesota-district-committed-to-an-alternative-four-years-ago/>.

¹³ Ryan Faircloth, “Minneapolis Public Schools terminates contract with Police Department over George Floyd's death” Star Tribune (June 2, 2020), available at <https://www.startribune.com/mps-school-board-ends-contract-with-police-for-school-resource-officers/570967942/>.

¹⁴ Lily Atravena, “Phoenix Union will no longer have Phoenix police officers on high school campuses,” Arizona Republic (July 7, 2020), available at <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenixeducation/2020/07/07/phoenix-union-no-longer-have-police-officers-assigned-campus/5394852002/>.

¹⁵ Melanie Asmar, “Denver school board votes to phase police out of district.” Denver Post (June 11, 2020, updated June 12, 2020), available at <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/11/dps-board-votes-to-phase-police-out-of-schools/>.

safety, build a strong school security program that focuses on prevention and intervention, and engage parents and students in decision-making around school safety.

The transition of the school security contract from MPD to DCPS should be managed in a way that results in transformative change in how DCPS promotes safety at school and redistributes funding and resources from an infrastructure that polices students. For example, DCPS can use this process to restructure the role that security officers play in the school community. Instead of having school security officers act as quasi-law enforcement, the school security officer position should be transformed into one that focuses on violence interruption, prevention, and intervention, and that change should be reflected in the job title and description. Current school security guards, who are often a valued part of the school community should have an opportunity to embrace these roles, and individuals with law enforcement experience or careers should be restricted from being eligible to work in new roles that are created. Funds should be directed into developing programs that necessitate conflict mediation that encourages the utilization of problem-solving skills to address safety risks and concerns. DCPS should develop and fund a training program, operated by community violence interrupters, that trains security guards to act as violence interrupters in schools. And, the hiring process for new roles related to safety and security should prioritize community input, particularly input from the students and families disproportionately impacted by school policing.

Conclusion

There is an opportunity and an urgent need to transform what school safety means in DCPS. DCPS must take care to reinvent the school security guard training and infrastructure so that our youth can effectively learn without the fear of being policed in their educational environments. There is no time for delay; by relying on the expertise of the community, advocates, and experts around the country (many of whom shared their recommendations in this public roundtable), DCPS can reinvest funding and resources to create a school safety program that supports, rather than criminalizes, students.