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Testimony before the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

In OPPOSITION to

Senate Bill 884- Public Schools- School Resource Officers- Firearms Required

**Shamoyia Gardiner, Education Policy Senior Associate, Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY)
March 13, 2019**

Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) has three major priorities for education this Session: (1) adequate and racially equitable funding for public schools, (2) reducing the presence of police in schools while embracing restorative approaches to school discipline, and (3) creating trauma-informed schools to maximize student success. Senate Bill 884 requires all School Resource Officers (SROs) to carry firearms while on the premises of the school(s) to which they are assigned. Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) is the only school system in Maryland in which SROs (School Police) are *not* authorized to do so. This means that SB 884 is targeted at Baltimore City, as Maryland's 23 counties are compliant in the status quo. SB 884 jeopardizes the realization of the aforementioned priorities and we oppose this bill for five key reasons:

This is a Local Issue Which Requires Local Solutions and Understanding of the Historical Context

Baltimore City is unique—while Maryland's other local school systems rely on memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with their jurisdiction's law enforcement agency, BCPS has its own sworn police force. BCPS officers are who are not stationed at one single school may keep their weapons with them at all times, and those who are stationed at a single school may retrieve their weapons in the event of an emergency. BCPS officers are accountable to certain provisions set forth under the federal consent decree that the Baltimore Police Department operates under.¹ SB 884 will pose new, complex issues for the terms of the consent decree, as well as for BCPS administration. This, and many other factors which require a localized historical context to be completely understood, is why this weighty decision must sit completely in the hands of Baltimore City residents and the officials they elected to represent their interests. ACY takes issue with the manner in which SB 884 was introduced and notes that House Bill 1373, a bill sponsored by a Baltimore City Delegate, is currently in the House Rules and Executive Nominations Committee. While we oppose that bill as well, HB 1373 is a better starting point from which to have this discussion.

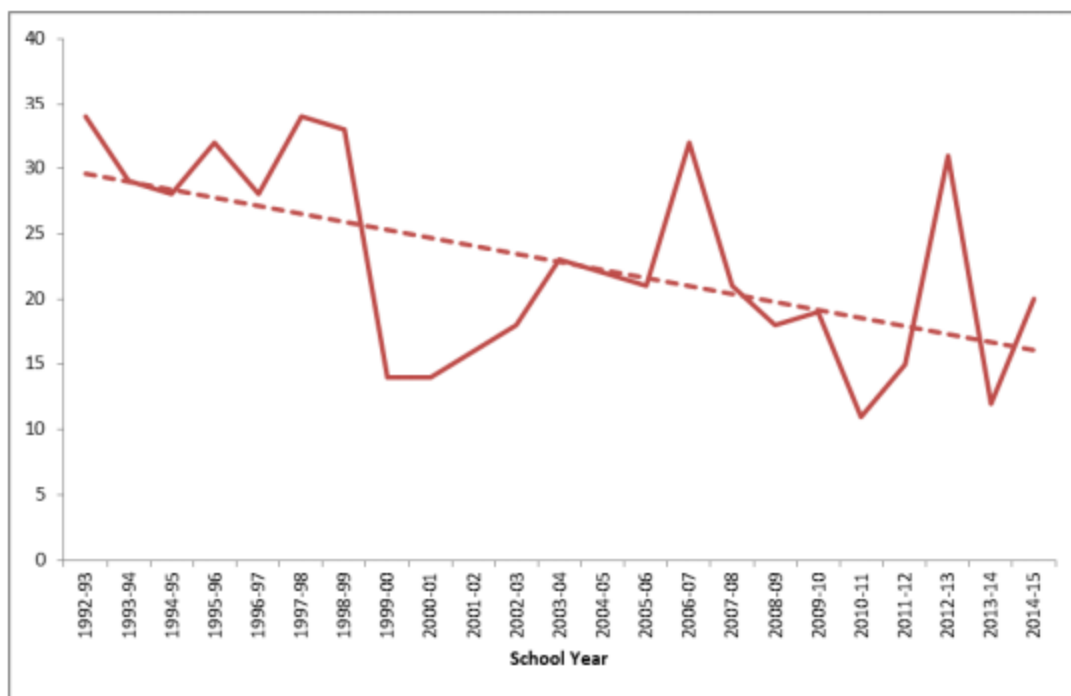
¹ Document: DOJ/Baltimore City Consent Decree Agreement. "United States of America, Plaintiff; v. Police Department of Baltimore City, et. al., Defendants" January 12, 2017.

The Presence of a Gun Does Not Preclude Tragedy

We must reject the notion that the presence of a gun automatically makes students safe. Most children who are victims of homicide are not killed at school², and while any homicide that takes place at a school justifiably increases community members' concerns about student safety at school, knee-jerk policy decisions are not the answer. There is no empirical evidence indicating that the presence of an armed SRO will prevent a school shooting. The argument that arming SROs will act as a deterrent to people who would otherwise perpetrate a school shooting has been debunked in instances like the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman-Douglas High, where an SRO was present and 17 people were murdered.

School Resource Officers: Issues for Congress

Figure 1. Number of At-School Homicides of Children Ages 5-18, SY1992-1993 to SY2014-2015



Source: Figure prepared by CRS using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017*.

Note: The dashed line in the figure is a trend line calculated by CRS.

At best, research regarding the effectiveness of SROs in preventing these tragedies is inconclusive; at worst, a positive correlation exists between the presence of SROs in high schools and instances of gun possession and threats of attack with a weapon.³

² Congressional Research Service. "School Resource Officers: Issues for Congress" July 5, 2018.

³ *ibid*

Requiring BCPS SROs to Carry Firearms in Schools Will Exacerbate Student Trauma

For Baltimore City's young people, many of whom have been affected by gun violence, it is imperative that school remain a safe, welcoming, comfortable space. A student who has been touched by gun violence cannot truly be comfortable in a gun's presence. For all students, not just those with multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), psychological comfort is a prerequisite to engaging with any instructional material. Arming SROs threatens student achievement, damages school climate, and flies in the face of efforts to implement restorative approaches to conflict. BCPS still has work to do regarding the implementation of its *Blueprint for Student Success*, and needs financial support, not increased gun presence, to meet its goals. Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data⁴ shows that in the 2015-2016 school year, 90 BCPS students were arrested on school property. Of those, 98% were African American, a disproportionate percentage considering that only 81%⁵ of BCPS students are African American. Moreover, when Baltimore students are arrested, most cases are thrown out, suggesting that the behaviors which led to arrest could have been handled by an alternative means, at school, without the intervention of the SRO. The introduction of firearms in BCPS schools could have lethal consequences for students of color, and the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of initiatives like SB 884 should be enough to make us pause.

Chronic Underfunding and Other Issues Pose an Actual, Recurring Threat to Student Safety

Teachers from Frederick Douglass High School, the site of the February 8th shooting in Baltimore City, have publicly condemned policy decisions which seek to arm SROs in the course of the normal school day. They have instead pointed to disinvestment in their school's facilities and operations, citing broken door locks, camera equipment, and other poorly-maintained security measures which they believe would have averted the events of that day if they had been functioning properly. Teachers have also noted that changes to their class loads and subject areas have placed less of a focus on relationship-building with students, which we know to be a critical component of school culture, ergo school safety. The presence of Douglass High's unarmed SRO and his two armed superiors did not stop the shooting that took place. In fact, BCPS SROs are so effective without guns that they were able to take subdue the shooter without either armed officer having to draw their weapons. That is both a testament to the high-quality training BCPS officers receive and proof that SB 884 is not necessary.

BCPS School Police Are At Their Most Effective Right Now

In less than 10 years, BCPS SROs cut student arrests by 91%. While not perfection, this progress is a result of decisions made by local leaders. BCPS Police Chief Hamm credited the reduction to new policies that are in line with national efforts which seek to build positive relationships between students and the officers.⁶ If police officers are to exist in school buildings at all, building relationships with students must be a primary goal. SB 884 would create a power imbalance in these critical, effective relationships by introducing a lethal weapon. As recently

⁴ Maryland State Department. (n.d.). Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data. Retrieved from <http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/StudentArrest/MarylandPublicSchoolsArrestData011218.pdf>

⁵ Civil Rights Data Collection. (2018). Baltimore City Public Schools. Retrieved from <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&eid=26918&syk=8&pid=2278>

⁶ Campus Safety Magazine. "Baltimore City Schools' Police Officer Arrest Rate Drops 91%" July 19, 2017.

as last month, a BCPS officer was presented with a Shield Award for his work and commitment to building relationships while protecting students. Permission to carry a gun in front of students is not a reward for good behavior--

The Voices of Students Must Be Prioritized on this Issue

Students from various organizations across Baltimore City, including the Baltimore Algebra Project and Youth As Resources, have made clear their opposition to allowing SROs to carry their firearms in schools throughout the day. These students are so compelled by this issue that they have made demonstrations at multiple public events, even subverting public discourse norms to ensure that their message is heard and heeded. It is our responsibility to listen to them.

It simply does not do to ignore the concerns of individuals with lived experiences related to this policy issue. We strongly encourage members of this committee and the entire General Assembly to hold the views of Baltimore City students and teachers in the absolute highest regard when decisions are made that will impact their daily lives and take into account the arguments provided in this testimony when making their decisions. **ACY strongly urges an unfavorable report on SB 884.**

