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## During hearing, young people push to remove school-based police

Elrich suggests mental health professionals replace officers, but area patrols for police

BY CAITLYNN PEETZ [FOLLOW @CAITLYNNPEETZ14](#) FEBRUARY 4, 2021 | 10:47 PM



People testify during a public hearing about a proposed law to

SCREENSHOT VIA LIVE STREAM

More than two dozen people — most of them students or recent graduates — pushed for removing police officers from Montgomery County Public Schools on Thursday.

The Montgomery County Council held a public hearing to get feedback about a [proposed law aimed at prohibiting school resource officers \(SROs\)](#). Of the 33 people who spoke, 31 were in favor of the bill.

Those showing their support for the bill included Montgomery County Executive Marc Elrich, a handful of student advocacy groups, two former student members

of the county school board, the student member of the Maryland State Board of Education, attorneys, the Montgomery County Chapters of the ACLU and NAACP, parents, MCPS students and alumni.

In opposition was a representative of the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office and a former County Council member who works in the State's Attorney's Office.

Those who support Council Members Hans Riemer and Will Jawando's bill to remove SROs point to data that show Black, Hispanic and special education students are [arrested at much higher rates than their peers.](#)

Current and former students told stories about feeling racially profiled by their school's assigned officer. Several white students said they've seen their Black classmates punished more harshly for minor offenses. Often, they said, the discipline should never have involved police at all.

"Our position comes from a place of fact and experience," said Daniella Mahlek-Dawveed, with the student advocacy group MoCo Against Brutality. "... There are still too many non-students prioritizing their perspective over our well-being."

Sidra Hoffman, a junior at Albert Einstein High School and representative of the Jewish youth organization Bonimot Tzedek, added that she feels the SRO program "puts my fellow students in danger."

"It isn't enough to be neutral in the face of injustice," Hoffman said. "We have to actively be working against it."

Conversely, Phil Andrews, the director of crime prevention initiatives for the State's Attorney's Office and a former County Council member, said there is evidence SROs have helped prevent serious incidents at local high schools.

He said students confided in school officers when they suspected their classmates had firearms on campus or had posted threats on social media.

“We need SROs and mental health services,” Andrews said. “... Passage of this bill would prohibit the county from using a proven strategy to keep kids safe.”

George Simms III, an assistant state’s attorney, said he was speaking on behalf of State’s Attorney John McCarthy.

He said SROs are some of the “most dedicated and compassionate people I have ever met” and they help families solve problems schools aren’t equipped to handle.

During the hearing, Caroline Sturgis, speaking on behalf of Elrich, said the county executive “supports removing full-time SROs from the schools and replacing officers with a team of mental health professionals and providing adequate law enforcement coverage through other means.”

Elrich’s preference, Sturgis said, would be to no longer have police stationed in school buildings. Rather, they would be assigned to patrol areas around schools and be called as needed.

The officers would be required to check-in with their assigned schools at least once per work day and respond to calls for help at those schools.

A similar idea was outlined by Council Member Nancy Navarro in a memo to Elrich on Wednesday.

Principals throughout MCPS [have said they want the SRO program to continue](#), although none spoke during Thursday’s public hearing.

On Feb. 23, the council will hold a public hearing on a separate bill proposed this week by members Craig Rice and Sidney Katz. That bill would keep police

officers stationed in schools as long as the superintendent welcomed them, and require them to undergo more training.

The new proposal by Rice and Katz would legally authorize the county police chief to assign SROs to county schools, if requested by the MCPS superintendent.

It would also require new school officers to undergo a year of “mentoring” from an “experienced and highly rated school resource officer” and several types of training.

The Maryland General Assembly is also [considering at least two bills that would remove SROs from schools statewide.](#)

One of the state bills from Montgomery County lawmakers, called the “Police Free Schools Act” was filed by Del. Gabe Acevero. It would prohibit police officers from being stationed in schools.

The other, filed by Del. Jheanelle Wilkins, the “Counselors not Cops Act,” would redirect a state fund that provides \$10 million per year to school districts across the state to expand their SRO programs. The money would instead be used to provide districts with more mental health services and promote restorative justice practices.

The Montgomery County Board of Education also has its own ongoing review to determine the future of the SRO program. The [results of the school board’s review are expected in May.](#)