

Steve Shapiro

Testimony in Support of School Resources Officers – Prohibited

My name is Steven Shapiro, I live in District 3. Today I am representing Jews for United Justice, with over 2500 members of the Montgomery County Jewish community advocating for racial and economic equity. Today I am testifying in favor of Bill 46-20, Prohibiting Police – School Resource Officers. Thank you to Councilmembers Jawando and Riemer for your leadership introducing this measure.

The past thirty plus years I have worked professionally designing conflict systems, training personnel in mediation and negotiation, and overseeing mediation programs. Currently, my work involves encouraging families and institutions in adopting practices that link healing collective trauma with conflicts in our families, schools, organizations and public life.

The Hebrew Prophet Isaiah said that: “Triumph comes through stillness and quiet; Victory comes through calm and confidence. But you do not listen. Instead you declare, I shall mount a swift horse and outrun my enemies. Good I made the horses of your enemies swifter still.” Instead of funding student support systems that bring peace to students, by funding School Resource Officers, (SROs) our County is investing in a program that discomforts Black and Latinx students and students in special education programs. Our County must instead shift funding for SROs towards restorative justice programs proven to improve student wellbeing.

My testimony today focuses on two practical applications that involve shifting resources and budget to support restorative justice applications such as: 1) Mindfulness and Trauma awareness amongst all students and staff and 2) Conflict coaching and mediation services.

Mindfulness and Trauma awareness: Our children and teens are facing a significant uptick in mental health challenges. Put our pandemic and other unrest stacked on top and we either have a very numb society or we have hyperactive signs of aggression and hostility. Our social workers, school psychologists, counselors and support teams ought to be implementing mindfulness and therapeutic practices in all schools.

Our children, teachers and administrators need to slow and calm their nervous systems through Mindfulness practices in order to be able to heal and learn fully. It is essential if we are going to build a healthy new society out of this period in our history. This work could also be essential in transitioning to full school opening.

Mediation and conflict coaching provide direct restorative approaches to resolving troubled situations in real time and potentially transforming the school environment to be about listening and respect.

These are not easy decisions. What makes the most sense is a concerted effort across the county for a vision and determination that our children need to be cared for as they re-enter the brick-and-mortar structures. This care includes building a new infrastructure of emotional awareness that excavates and rebuilds new systems of emotional intelligence across our county, instead of infrastructure that criminalizes students for being students.

For these reasons I support the proposed legislation, and I encourage continued investment in the staff and programs needed to support student wellbeing and restorative practices.

Steve is an attorney/mediator in private practice in Montgomery County.