



**Statement of Seema Gajwani
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Justice Section
Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia**

Before the Committee of the Whole

**Public Hearing
on
School Security in District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools**

**Wednesday, April 21, 2021
12:00 pm**

Virtual Hearing via Zoom

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and Councilmembers, for holding this important hearing. My name is Seema Gajwani. I am Special Counsel for Juvenile Justice Reform and Chief of the Restorative Justice Section at the Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia (“OAG”). I am proud to represent OAG and Attorney General Karl Racine and to testify before you on School Security in District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools.

Upon taking office in 2015, Attorney General Racine was keenly focused on disrupting the school to prison pipeline in the District. To address this, we began by analyzing three years of data relating to arrests made on school grounds, during school hours. What we found was that school arrests were concentrated in a limited number of middle and high schools; that most arrests were for low level offenses, mostly simple assault; and that 47% of the cases were not prosecuted by our office. We also looked at research, which suggested that being handcuffed and arrested on school grounds—potentially in view of other students and school personnel—could be deeply stigmatizing and humiliating, and lead to poor attendance or truancy. In some cases, it could be traumatic. We were also cognizant that being arrested at school is seen by some as a rite of passage that reduces a child’s healthy fear of being “in the system.” This is especially likely where almost half of those arrests result in dismissals. And youth involved in the juvenile justice system have worse rates of high school graduation, involvement in criminal behavior, and substance abuse, as compared to similarly situated youth turned away from the system.

All children need to feel safe in school—to learn, to grow, and, critically, to make mistakes. What this data showed us is that a police presence in the schools does not necessarily make children safer. And, in some cases, the presence of police makes them less safe. These arrests were inflicting serious harm, largely upon black and brown children, without a corresponding public safety benefit. We all want our schools to be safe, no one more than the students and their families. To craft effective and enduring solutions, we must listen to those most impacted by these policies and empower communities to develop solutions that work for them, their children, and their teachers. We also must engage with our law enforcement partners. I am pleased to tell you that OAG and MPD are in discussions about reducing police presence in schools, and the conversations have been productive and fruitful. We will continue to work with MPD to ensure children are safe in school, beginning with the fundamental proposition that police presence and arrest in school should be rare.

In that larger conversation, OAG offers three suggestions for maintaining school safety while limiting law enforcement and court involvement for students. First, for target middle and high schools, we should expand community-based violence interruption programs into the schools. These violence interrupters can intervene in, de-escalate, and resolve conflicts that sometimes reach into and out of the schools. Second, we should invest in high quality training of existing school staff. And, third, we should support schools in building their broader internal disciplinary infrastructure.

First, schools need support to deal with serious conflict. For the small number of schools with persistent issues of serious conflict and violence, we should expand existing community-based violence interruption programs into the schools by funding the hiring and training of school-based violence interrupter staff. Some schools already enlist the help of neighborhood violence interrupters to facilitate safe passage and address certain types of serious conflict. Community-

based violence interrupters can help address more complex conflicts that simmer between youth or groups and spill out of school buildings into surrounding neighborhoods or into schools from community or social media. Violence interrupters specifically hired and trained to work with schools could spend time in certain high schools and middle schools, learn about existing conflicts between groups, and help mediate those conflicts to prevent violence or retaliation, just as violence interrupters do in the community. Violence interrupters bring credibility, lived experience, and a passion for service and peace to their work and to young people. Some more established Cure Violence programs in other jurisdictions have school programs, with staff assigned to schools in their target neighborhoods. As we reconsider the safety protocols within schools, this may be the time to expand violence interruption programs through ONSE and OAG to work in schools.

Second, schools must address day-to-day behavior challenges and volatility within the building. Many DC schools have staff dedicated to behavior and discipline who handle on-site conflict. At Ballou Senior High School, for example, they are called “Behavior Techs” and they report to the Dean of Discipline. Unlike police, behavior techs are on-staff and often are known to students. They do not wear uniforms or carry guns. They walk the halls and enforce rules of conduct at the school. However, they are not therapists or social workers and they may not have effective tools for de-escalation. Investing in high quality training for this staff could reduce the need for police in schools.

School Behavior Techs should be trained to de-escalate intense behavior issues, mediate conflict, and empower youth involved in conflict to make better decisions. One example of high-quality training for youth workers is the REWIRE training used by Roca, Inc. in Boston, Massachusetts. Roca is a highly regarded program that provides wrap-around services to high-risk youth and young adults. Roca works with high-risk, disengaged youth who are deeply involved in dangerous behavior. Roca developed its own version of culturally competent, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for use by non-therapist, front-line youth workers, called REWIRE. Roca believes that every interaction with a young person is an opportunity to administer CBT. Doing so democratizes access to therapy and provides youth workers with tools that help young people change their behavior and connect their emotional reactions to their own experiences of trauma and loss. It is the sort of valuable training that should be provided to existing behavior staff at schools.

Finally, long term, we must invest in changing the norms within schools to prevent conflict and violence. Building out restorative justice in schools through community-based training programs and student restorative justice courses can achieve that long-term culture change. But it takes time and resources. DCPS and OSSE are supporting local community groups such as School Talk and Youth and Families in Crisis to train teachers and staff in restorative justice. Significantly more restorative justice staff-training resources must be invested in target schools to impact school culture enough to reduce violence, however. I spent a lot of time at Ballou Senior High School in 2015-2016. The principal at the time, Dr. Yetunde Reeves, had been the principal at a restorative school in Oakland, California and was trying to bring restorative justice to Ballou. Ballou is where I first learned about restorative justice. Through that experience, I learned that investments in restorative justice training and coaching for teachers and staff must be made and sustained over several years.

On a parallel track, course-based restorative justice for students can help accelerate culture change at school. For example, one program that appears to show promise in training students about

restorative justice was devised by Dionna Shinn, director of the nonprofit organization Youth Justice, Inc. The Youth Justice course administered in high schools teaches 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students about the justice system and restorative justice. After several weeks of learning and training, Ms. Shinn's class receives referrals for disciplinary problems that occur within the school. Her students use restorative justice principles to work with the people involved in the low-level conflict—sometimes conflict between students and sometimes conflict between students and staff—to resolve the underlying issue, make amends, and reduce the likelihood that it will happen again. Ms. Shinn's class was operating at Thurgood Marshall High School for three years when the school principal testified at a Council hearing that his school had reduced the number of suspensions, expulsions, and arrests to almost zero, due in large part to the impact of their restorative justice course. The brilliance of this strategy is that school conflict is handled by peers, not adults, attributing more credibility and legitimacy to the outcomes. And, the students in the restorative justice course build leadership and conflict resolution skills. In only one or two years, this restorative justice course had a significant impact on the culture of the entire school. Youth Justice, Inc. is currently working in a handful of District schools, and we are aware of similar efforts, like the Peer Mediation Program at Washington Latin Public Charter School, that enlist students to be mediators of conflict in the school setting. Programs like these should be expanded.

Rethinking the role of police in schools provides the District with a chance to imagine a different world of possibilities with which to help our children grow and thrive through a difficult time in their lives and in sometimes difficult circumstances. Thank you for holding this hearing so that we can learn from those who are most deeply affected by our policies and who want their schools and government systems to stand by their children and support their families. As always, we are ready to help.