

Coalition for Smart Responses to Student Behavior

September 20, 2022

Senate Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

House Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 238
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Reject FY2023 Supplemental Budget line item 1599-1250

Dear Chairs Michlewitz and Rodrigues, and Members of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means:

We, the undersigned organizations, urge you to reject line item 1599-1250 from the Governor's proposed supplemental budget. While we share the Governor's interest in improving school safety, his request - \$37.25 million with no guardrails attached - runs counter to this body's careful efforts to create safe, welcoming schools without expanding the School-to-Prison Pipeline. At best, the Governor's proposal is exactly the type of "cop out" the *Boston Globe* predicted,ⁱ throwing money at a complex problem that requires a thoughtful and nuanced approach, while creating a false sense of security. At worst, these provisions would do more harm than good, creating far more problems than we have now.

After the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service noted that a critical way to prevent such tragedies was to build trusting relationships between students and school employees.ⁱⁱ That way, if a student learned that another student planned to harm themselves or others, they could inform a trusted adult at school. Nonetheless, since then, our nation has invested billions of dollars in school-based policing, metal detectors, and surveillance equipment with little evidence of their effectiveness in making schools safer and plenty of evidence of their harms.ⁱⁱⁱ Among them:

- Arrest rates and suspension rates increase, and graduation and college enrollment rates decrease, when police are placed in schools, particularly for Black male students.^{iv}
- Being stopped at school by police officers is a "potent" predictor of heightened emotional distress and post-traumatic stress symptoms in youth.^v
- The presence of guards and metal detectors in schools significantly increased students' perceptions of fear.^{vi} And,
- A meta-analysis of school-based practices to reduce firearm violence found that "hardening of schools seems to be a questionable endeavor for schools, given the dearth of evidence regarding effectiveness."^{vii}

By providing \$20 million for school "security and communications upgrades" with no restrictions, the Governor's proposal turns its back on a decade's worth of careful work to keep

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our school children safe without criminalizing adolescence. Massachusetts must do - and *has done* - better than this. The *Safe and Supportive Schools Act of 2014* supports schools in responding to children's trauma - perhaps the best way to prevent future violence. The Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2018 wisely restricts young people's contact with both school police and the juvenile justice system. The policing reforms of 2020 limit what student information can be shared by schools with law enforcement. The Baker Administration's 2021 Behavioral Health Roadmap ensures "the right treatment when and where people need it."^{viii} Finally, the legislature passed, just last month, An Act Addressing Barriers to Care for Mental Health ("Chapter 177") with a significant focus on the well-being of children and students.^{ix} The lack of guidelines for use of the Governor's budget proposal risks undermining the will of the legislature in determining how school safety is achieved.

The few guidelines the Governor provides are similarly problematic. The budget request would require \$1 million to be spent on threat assessment, a practice that inherently plays into ever-present biases against students of color and students with disabilities and has been tied to profiling, increasing law enforcement interactions with children, ineffective referrals and conflicts with federal and state laws.^x It also would require \$1 million for an anonymous tip line that has no provisions to address the possibility of false reports or biased use and would likely lend itself to the same, even though Massachusetts now has a 988 helpline at its disposal.

This body has already done the hard work of legislating school safety: balancing the competing interests of the many stakeholders involved in education and coming up with solutions that still give schools flexibility to determine what works best for them. Please do not let this budget request upend that fragile balance. Please reject this line item, or, at the very least, redirect these funds to strengthening evidence-based interventions such as:

- Increasing *Safe and Supportive Schools* grants^{xi};
- Convening student advisory committees^{xii} – and providing technical assistance^{xiii} – to inform school-based interventions as authorized by Chapter 177;
- Supporting holistic school safety models that do not rely on police presence;^{xiv} and,
- Providing grants for restorative justice and other approaches shown to improve bonds between students and teachers while reducing suspension rates and disparities.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Massachusetts
ADL New England
Bethel Institute for Community Development
Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the Civil Rights Project at UCLA
Children's League of Massachusetts

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Citizens for Juvenile Justice
Citizens for Public Schools
Committee for Public Counsel Services
Framingham Families for Racial Equity in Education
Free Worcester
Greater Boston Legal Services
Greenfield Racial Justice
Justice Center of Southeast MA
Justice Resource Institute
MA Commission on LGBTQ+ Youth
Mass Mentoring Partnership
Massachusetts Advocates for Children
Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance
Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee
NAACP - Worcester Branch
National Association of Social Workers – MA Chapter
New Bedford Coalition to Save Our Schools
Parent/Professional Advocacy League
Progressive Massachusetts
Roxbury Youthworks
Strategies for Youth

Hon. Jay Blitzman, 1st Justice of the Juvenile Court, Middlesex Division (Ret'd.)
Daniel J. Losen
Denise Wolk
Flavia Peréa
Aminah Pilgrim, Ph.D.

Cc: Speaker Ron Mariano
Senate President Karen Spilka

ⁱ Editorial, “[Police in Schools Isn’t a Solution to School Shootings. It’s a Cop-Out.](#)” *Boston Globe* (Jun. 3, 2022).

ⁱⁱ U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Dep’t. of Educ., [The Final Report and Findings of the Safe Schools Initiative](#) 42 (2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, e.g., Citizens for Juvenile Justice & Strategies for Youth, [Fail: School Policing in Massachusetts](#) (2020) (cataloging studies on the harms of school-based policing).

^{iv} Weisburst, E., [Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-term Education Outcome](#), October 2018. A pair of studies released this July by the Office of Justice Programs’ National Criminal Justice Reference Service present these harms in stark detail:

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“This study found no evidence to suggest that increasing the dosage of SROs via CHP grants to local law enforcement agencies reduces school crime. Instead, consistent with prior research, it found that the intervention increased measures of school crime – particularly for weapon and drug-related offenses. It also found clear evidence that increasing SRO staffing levels results in increased exclusion from school in response to disciplinary infractions. Increases in offenses and exclusionary reactions to offenses were most evident for students without special needs as opposed to students with special needs, schools in urban/suburban as opposed to town/rural locations, and for black and Hispanic as opposed to white students. Our study provides more and stronger evidence to support the idea that placing SROs in schools results in excluding students from school, and that this punishment falls disproportionately on minority students.” Benjamin W. Fischer et al, [School Climate, Student Discipline, and the Implementation of School Resource Officers](#) (2022).

"For the most part, the sorts of problem behaviors that SROs were concerned about were those that might be committed by students including fighting, drugs, rule violations, and a variety of other potential problem behaviors. However, the SROs did not understand the threats to the school in the same way across schools. In schools with larger percentages of White students, SROs were mostly concerned about rule violations and viewed misbehavior as part of a normative part of adolescent development. In contrast, SROs in schools with the smallest percentages of White students were most concerned about violent and criminal behaviors and attributed these potential threats to the students' poor upbringings, families, and communities, using some language that reflected racial tropes about Black people." Scott Crosse et al, [Investigator-Initiated Research: The Comprehensive School Safety Initiative Study of Police in Schools](#) (2022).

^v Bachman, R. et al. [Predicting Perceptions of Fear at School and Going to and From School for African American and White Students: The Effects of School Security Measures](#), Youth and Society, 43(2): 705–726 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X10366674>.

^{vi} *Id.*

^{vii} Price, J, et al. School Firearm Violence Prevention Practices and Policies: Functional or Folly? Violence and Gender 6(3):153-167 (2019).

^{viii} Massachusetts Exec. Office of Health and Human Svc's., *Roadmap for Behavioral Health Reform*, at: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/roadmap-for-behavioral-health-reform>.

^{ix} Chapter 177 of the Acts of 2022.

^x National Disability Rights Center (NDRN), *The Problems with Threat Assessment in Schools* (2022), at: <https://www.ndrn.org/resource/the-problems-with-threat-assessments-in-schools/>.

^{xi} Line item 7061-9612.

^{xii} Chapter 6A section 16DD.

^{xiii} Chapter 6A section 16FF.

^{xiv} Senator Chandler's [proposed amendments 645 and 646 to the FY2023 budget](#) would provide grants for schools and districts to implement safety measures that do not rely on increasing police presence.