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CONGRESSWOMAN AYANNA PRESSLEY

THE GENERAL COURT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
JOINT COMMITTEE ON RACIAL EQUITY, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND INCLUSION
HEARING TESTIMONY
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Thank you Chair Chang-Diaz, Chair Williams, Vice Chair Cyr, and Vice Chair Malia for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Joint Committee on Racial Equity, Civil Rights, and Inclusion (“Committee”). I am encouraged by the much needed commitment to advancing equity and justice for my constituents in the Massachusetts 7th Congressional District and all residents of the Commonwealth.

It is critical that this Committee prioritizes legislation that will dismantle the school-to-confinement nexus by reallocating funding from school-based law enforcement and investing that money in culturally responsive nurses, mental health professionals, and other trauma-informed staff. When our education system is intertwined with the criminal legal system, students of color and students, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately forced to endure unjust treatment that infringes on their right to learn. Instead of police, we must provide our youth with the proven resources that help them grow and cultivate their potential. Students need counseling, not criminalization.

For years, I have heard from children and parents, read news reports, and witnessed horrific footage depicting the unacceptable abuse, humiliation, and trauma that our young people experience due to the significant presence of law enforcement in our schools. This is happening in Massachusetts, just miles away from the State House.

A child has no business being forced to interact with law enforcement. Recently, in response to sustained community pressure and advocacy, the City of Somerville voted to suspend the school district’s school-police Memorandum of Understanding and end the systematic presence of police in Somerville Public Schools.¹ It is past time the rest of the Commonwealth takes steps to put an end to police in schools.

Failing to disentangle our education system from the criminal legal system will continue to harm our students. Classrooms should not be places characterized by fear and criminalization. It is well documented that students in schools with police are more likely to be suspended, referred to law enforcement, and arrested in school.² Harsh, zero-tolerance discipline policies are

¹ Justice for Fla via, *Somerville becomes second city in Massachusetts to remove police from schools*, Liberation News (May 19, 2021), <https://www.liberationnews.org/somerville-becomes-second-city-in-massachusetts-to-remove-police-from-schools/>.

² Benjamin W. Fisher, and Emily A. Hennessy, *School Resource Officers and exclusionary discipline in U.S. high schools: A systematic review and meta-analysis*, *Adolescent Research Review* 1, 217 (2016); Emily M. Homer &

disproportionately weaponized against students who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and those with disabilities.³ Girls of color, more specifically, experience greater rates of police harassment and violence while in school, exacerbating the pushout crisis.⁴ Across Massachusetts, Black girls are four times as likely to be arrested as white girls.⁵ To address this ongoing problem, I introduced the [Ending PUSHOUT Act](#), federal legislation to address exclusionary discipline practices and policies imbued with racial and gender bias.⁶ There must be a deliberate and concerted effort to ensure our schools are places for learning and growth, which means removing law enforcement from the classroom.

Instead of funding police officers, Massachusetts should invest in counselors, nurses, social workers, and other trained professionals in order to ensure healthy school climates. Every student deserves a culturally congruent, trauma-informed support system. However, one out of every three students in the Commonwealth attends a school with a police officer but no school psychologist, school nurse, social worker, or counselor.⁷ Additionally, 66% of all students (more than 600,000 children) across the state attend a school that fails to meet the adequate school to counselor ratio.⁸ These are inexcusable failures that will have lasting negative impacts on the development of our youth. Schools that employ more school-based mental health providers see fewer disciplinary incidents, improved academic achievement, and higher graduation rates.⁹ In the last year alone, our young people have been exposed to unprecedented mental distress, including trauma from police violence and the COVID-19 pandemic, so we must do all that we can to facilitate their healing.

Benjamin W. Fisher, *Police in schools and student arrest rates across the United States: Examining differences by race, ethnicity, and gender*, 19 *Journal of School Violence* 2, 192 (2020).

³ Scott Crosse, et al., *Are Effects of School Resource Officers Moderated by Student Race and Ethnicity?*, *Crime & Delinquency* (2020). For an interactive map tracking incidents of school police violence against students of color and students with disabilities, see The Advancement Project and Alliance for Educational Justice, “#AssaultAt Map” (2019), <https://wecametolearn.com/#assaultat-map>.

⁴ YWCA USA, *We Still Deserve Safety: Ending the Criminalization of Women and Girls of Color* (2020), <https://www.ywca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/09-WeStillDeserveSafety-FINALREPORT.pdf> (collecting examples on pages 23-25); Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality’s Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity, *Data Snapshot: 2017-2018 National Data on School Discipline by Race and Gender* (Dec. 2020), <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/National-Data-on-School-Discipline-by-Race-and-Gender.pdf>.

⁵ American Civil Liberties Union, “Cops and No Counselors, How the Lack of Mental Health Staff is Harming Students,” (2020), Amir Whitaker, Whitaker, Sylvia Torres-Guillen, Michelle Morton, Harold Jordan, Stephanie Coyle, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors>.

⁶ *Reps. Pressley, Watson Coleman, Omar Re-Introduce Bold Legislation to End School Pushout of Girls of Color*, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley (Mar. 26, 2021), <https://pressley.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-pressley-watson-coleman-omar-re-introduce-bold-legislation-end-school>.

⁷ American Civil Liberties Union, “Cops and No Counselors, How the Lack of Mental Health Staff is Harming Students,” (2020), Amir Whitaker, Whitaker, Sylvia Torres-Guillen, Michelle Morton, Harold Jordan, Stephanie Coyle, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Richard T. Lapan, Sara A. Whitcomb, and Nancy M. Aleman, *Connecticut professional school counselors: College and career counseling services and smaller ratios benefit students*, 16 *Professional School Counseling* 2, 117 (2012); Richard T. Lapan, Norman C. Gysbers, and Yongmin Sun, *The impact of more fully implemented guidance programs on the school experiences of high school students: A statewide evaluation study*, 75 *Journal of Counseling & Development* 4, 292 (1997); Kevin Tan, et al., *The impact of school social workers on high school freshman graduation among the one hundred largest school districts in the United States*, 39 *School Social Work Journal* 2, 1 (2015).

In Congress, I have introduced, along with Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, the [Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act](#) that can serve as a model for this Committee.¹⁰ The legislation would prohibit the use of federal funds on police in schools and instead provide resources to school districts to support the hiring of counselors, nurses, social workers and other health care providers—critical personnel with the training and professional expertise in serving vulnerable students, improving educational outcomes, and keeping schools safe. My bill was created in partnership with students, parents, teachers, and advocates in Massachusetts and across the country. Black and brown students, immigrant students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and other historically marginalized students demand and deserve to learn in a setting free from fear. And it is incumbent upon all policymakers to manifest that reality.

This Committee has an opportunity to be intentional and precise in legislating justice and equity by replacing law enforcement in our schools with counselors. As we begin to turn the page on the COVID-19 pandemic, we cannot simply return to the status quo because the status quo was never good enough. In this moment, it is critical that we do all that we can to root out systemic oppression everywhere it exists, including in our schools.

A more just Commonwealth is possible.

¹⁰ *Support Grows for the Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act*, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley (Aug. 14, 2020), <https://pressley.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-pressley-omar-sens-murphy-warren-unveil-bill-get-police-out-schools>