September 3, 2020

Dear Honorable members of the North Carolina Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice,

I am writing on behalf of the National Association of Social Workers North Carolina Chapter (NASW-NC). NASW-NC is a membership organization that promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW-NC seeks to enhance the effective functioning and well-being of individuals, families and communities through its work and advocacy.

For far too many students, entering the gateway to incarceration begins with a referral from the classroom to the courtroom, also known as the school-to-prison pipeline. NASW-NC asks the Task Force to make the following policy recommendations for North Carolina:

1. Invest in nationally recommended number of health support staff such as school social workers, counselors, psychologists and nurses to better address the needs of students in public schools
2. Make school-based mental health services available to all K-12 students in North Carolina
3. Reduce the number of school resource officers (SROs) statewide.

These recommendations align with the Task Force’s charge of “addressing existing policies and procedures that disproportionately affect communities of color and developing solutions to ensure racial equity in North Carolina’s criminal justice system.”

The Need for School Social Workers and School-Based Mental Health Services

- Between 18-20% of students have mental health issues significant enough to cause impairment to major life functions, only 1 in 5 receive the necessary services.
- Students of color, students from low income families, and students with disabilities are at greater risk for mental health challenges, but are even less likely to receive the appropriate services.
- Students with untreated mental health issues may develop more significant problems which can greatly impact their educational experience and result in poor educational outcomes including the possibility of dropping out of school.

School social workers address all these needs.

According to the National Association of Social Workers, school social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker per 250 students.\(^1\) In 2018, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) reported the ratio in North Carolina is one school social worker to 1,427 students.\(^2\)

The benefits of investing in mental health services are clear: Schools with such services see improved attendance rates, better academic achievement, and higher graduation rates as well as lower rates of suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary incidents. Data shows that the presence of school-based mental health providers not only improves outcomes for students but can also improve overall school safety.\(^3\)

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2. [https://files.nc.gov/governor/SISP_Overview.pdf](https://files.nc.gov/governor/SISP_Overview.pdf)
North Carolina’s Racial Disparity of Student Arrests

School disciplinary policies with the use of SROs disproportionately affect Black students. In the U.S., Black students are suspended and expelled three times more than white students and are, therefore, more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system within the calendar year.4 In North Carolina, black students are nearly six times more likely to be arrested at school and school activities than white students, according to federal data.5 This disparity is among the worst in the country.

Law enforcement arrested more than 600 North Carolina students on public school grounds, during off-campus school activities or on school transportation during the 2015-16 school year, according to the data from the U.S. Department of Education. In North Carolina, 9.2 out of every 10,000 black students were arrested, compared to 1.6 white students. Only three other states – West Virginia, Iowa and Rhode Island – had a higher disparity between the arrest rates of black and white students.6

There is no evidence that increased law enforcement presence in schools improves school safety. In many cases, it causes harm. When in schools, law enforcement officers do what they are trained to do, which is to “patrol and secure”. This leads to greater student alienation and a more threatening school climate. The glaring deficit of mental health staff in schools and the growing use of law enforcement in schools to aid in disciplinary measures is a dangerous combination and a central reason the most vulnerable students are being funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline.

A recent evaluation of the impact of North Carolina’s state grant program for school resource officers (SROs) concluded that middle schools that used state grants to hire and train SROs did not report reductions in serious incidents like assaults, homicide, bomb threats, possession and use of alcohol and drugs, or the possession of weapons.7 Research has indicated that having school-based law enforcement contributes to less inclusive school climates, and this makes students less safe.8

North Carolina should be supporting students’ mental health and wellbeing, not policing them. Reducing the number of SROs and hiring more school social workers will provide a better link between the home, school and community through support services that positively impact the development of the whole child.

We thank the Task Force for your consideration to recommend North Carolina invest in social workers, counselors, psychologists and nurses; invest fully in school-based mental health services; and reduce the number of school resource officers as a part of the solution to address racial disparities in the North Carolina Criminal Justice system.

Sincerely,

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5 https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-2015-16.html
6 https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-2015-16.html
8 https://www.endzerotolerance.org/school-policing