



June 10, 2021

Representative Alice Peisch, House Chair and
Senator Jason M. Lewis, Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Education
State House, Room 473G
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Testimony in Support of H.648/S.286, *An Act Relative to Safer Schools*

Dear Chairwoman Peisch, Chairman Lewis, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice (“Massachusetts Appleseed”) respectfully submits the following letter in support of H.648/S.286, *An Act Relative to Safer Schools* and strongly urges the Joint Committee on Education to give the bill a favorable report.

The mission of Massachusetts Appleseed is to promote equal rights and opportunities for Massachusetts residents by developing and advocating for systemic solutions to social justice issues. Appleseed centers across the country work both collectively and independently to build a society in which opportunities are genuine, access to the law is universal and equal, and government advances the public interest. Central to this mission is ensuring that Massachusetts schools are safe, inclusive places for children of all circumstances and backgrounds, and in particular students of color.

Unfortunately, many students attending Massachusetts schools with a police presence – often through the assignment of School Resource Officers (SROs) – feel unsafe, uncomfortable, and thus unable to focus on their studies. Having police in schools has been tied directly to greater numbers of suspensions, lower graduation rates, and lower college enrollment rates.¹ In addition to the correlation between police presence and poor educational outcomes, a recent report published by Citizens for Juvenile Justice (CFJJ) found that having police in schools increases arrests for school rule violations that are not typically considered criminal, further criminalizing Black and Latinx students. In Massachusetts specifically, Black and Latinx students represent 27% of all students, but 64% of all arrests.²

To remedy this discrepancy and support students of color across Massachusetts who have begun to demand police free schools, Massachusetts Appleseed strongly urges you to provide a favorable report for H.648/S.286, *An Act Relative to Safer Schools*. This bill would create a police-free schools transition grant that provides one year of state funding to districts seeking to end police placement in schools. Schools would be able to use these funds to identify and implement best practices for school safety that prioritize strengthening relationships between students and adults, provide training to educators, engage community, and identify ways to allocate the cost savings of not placing police in schools. This funding

¹ Emily K. Weisburst, “Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-term Education Outcomes,” (October 2018).

² Citizens for Juvenile Justice, “Fail: School Policing in Massachusetts,” (2020)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58ea378e414fb5fae5ba06c7/t/5f64b57d40e1a14ef6c1c468/1600435601167/SchoolSafetyPolicyReport.pdf>

would also support the creation of safety teams that include parents, students, teachers, and community so that each school has adequate safety planning for emergencies.

The ingenuity of the police-free grant policy as a solution to the SRO crisis is directly tied to the mechanism that increased the presence of School Resource Officers in the first place. In 1994, Congress passed the Gun Free Schools Act, which created 100,000 new police officers and established “Community Oriented Policing Services” (COPS) grants. After the Columbine shooting in 1999, the COPS program created the “COPS in Schools” (CIS) grant, which awarded more than \$750 million in grants to more than 3,000 law-enforcement agencies, resulting in over 6,500 newly hired school police officers.³ As such, the proliferation of police in schools can be largely tied to the COPS and CIS grant programs, which were originally designed to prevent school shootings. However, a 2018 Washington Post analysis of almost 200 incidents of gun violence at schools found only two times where an SRO successfully intervened in a shooting.⁴

Rather than protecting students – as was their intended job description – we know instead that SROs in the Commonwealth are more likely to inflict harm upon Black and brown youth. H.648/S.286 seeks to remedy the problems initially instigated by the federal grant programs detailed above by using a state grant system to incentivize a transition to police-free schools and reallocate funds towards training and an infusion of mental health counselors. Through a new state grant program, this bill would be able to begin counteracting the often-harmful psychological impact and increased criminalization that comes from police presence in schools, originally encouraged by federal grants that placed officers in schools.

In addition to providing funding to school districts that elect to remove police from their schools, *An Act Relative to Safer Schools* simultaneously requires that superintendents who continue to request SROs for their district must provide the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education with data on school-based arrests and referrals to law enforcement. The bill also requires additional data to be collected related to school policing, such as all one-on-one interactions between officers and students.

As has been detailed above, having police in schools significantly increases the percentage of students, and primarily students of color, who will experience poor educational outcomes, a school-related arrest, or a referral to law enforcement. ***An Act Relative to Safer Schools* would represent a crucial step towards keeping vulnerable youth out of the juvenile justice system or criminal legal system, and instead keeping them in class where they can learn.** For all of these reasons, Massachusetts Appleseed strongly urges you to issue a favorable report for H.648/S.286.

Respectfully submitted,



Deborah M. Silva,
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Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice

³ Alliance for Educational Justice, “A Call to Action for Police-Free Schools” <https://wecametolearn.com/>

⁴ Scarred by School Shootings, Washington Post, (March 25, 2018). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/us-school-shootings-history/>