

# Ball, Martirano call for dialogue on police presence in Howard County schools

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In the wake of protesters and supporters in the Black Lives Matter Movement calling for a re-evaluation or defunding of the program that places police officers in county public schools, County Executive Calvin Ball has called for a community conversation to examine the efficacy of the program.

The function and existence of the school resource officers program has ranked high among grievances of protesters this summer as issues of police brutality and racial equity have gained prominence following the killing of George Floyd by a police officer May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Protesters at two large Black Lives Matter rallies in the county last month — on [June 2 in the parking lot outside the AMC Columbia 14](#) theater and on [June 18 at Western Regional Park in Cookesville](#) — asked the county to re-evaluate the SRO program. In, Columbia organizers demanded police be removed from schools entirely.

“I want our students and educators and families to be safe and to feel safe, and I think that is a conversation that we need to have as a community,” Ball said last week.

Ball did not say whether he would consider removing the armed officers from schools. He did, however, point out that there were people who wanted more of them in schools.

“There should be a conversation about their role, about what specifically are some of the concerns, [and] can they be ameliorated?” Ball said. “Sometimes it’s just a matter of having an open dialogue about more understanding, about improved training, about temperament, about perception. I think all those things are worthwhile points of conversation.”

The school system defines the resource officers as “police officers who assist the school administration in analyzing law enforcement problems in schools, investigating criminal incidents and building positive relationships with students and staff while providing a safe school environment and deterrence to crime.”

According to public schools spokesman Brian Bassett, there is an officer in each of the 12 high schools and the Homewood School, another six are split among 12 middle schools, and there are none in elementary schools.

School resource officers assist school administrators in elementary schools and the other middle schools when needed, according to Bassett.

Howard schools Superintendent Michael Martirano said understanding the complete role of school resource officers is necessary when evaluating their necessity.

After the mass shooting that left 17 people dead Feb. 14, 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, Martirano said there was “a significant push by the Howard County community to enhance efforts to keep schools safe including the expansion of the SRO program.”

Maya Carey, one of the founders of Peers, Not Perps, a county collective of groups rooted in the Black Lives Matter movement that advocates for police-free schools in Howard County, said students — particularly students of color — do not feel safer with the presence of police officers.

“I did feel so uncomfortable having them there,” Carey said. “It was a stress reaction to walk by them in schools. You see their guns in schools, and you know their power.”

Carey, a Columbia resident and Atholton High graduate, started organizing with other local groups such as HoCo for Justice, Black Lives Matter at School 365 Coalition and Anti-Racist Education Alliance after Floyd was killed.

“The people who I’m working with are less focused on reform and more focused on getting police presence out of schools,” Carey said. “There is a lot more focused on symptoms; you need to address things at the root or it’s going to perpetuate the criminalization of Black and brown students.”

[County Police Chief Lisa Myers](#) said she often hears people talk about what she called extreme responses to the school resource officers program.

“The SRO programs are valuable programs if done right,” Myers said of the program, which has been active for 21 years in county public schools.

Myers, who attributed the longevity of the program in the county to the number of school shootings around the country, said the SRO program in the county was “absolutely” done right.

According to Bassett, all school resource officers have been through the state-mandated School Resource Officer Certification Training as have all the unarmed security guards that patrol the schools. The training was created and is taught by the Maryland Center for School Safety.

The school resource officers program allows for the police to connect with local youth, according to Myers. Schools also are a place where Howard County police can advertise for programs and recruit cadets.

“I would advocate [for] keeping SROs as well as looking at, particularly from a youth perspective, how do we institute more programs or initiatives that help to build better relationships,” Myers said. “I imagine in the conversation, and looking at policing, it’s kind of covering the gamut of, if you’re talking about defunding police departments what does that mean? What, does translate into?”

Carey said schools should not be a place for police to recruit.

“That’s a really sad excuse for how you want to engage with students,” Carey said. “You shouldn’t be using the school system for your recruiting. What other agency has the power to recruit people for four years?”

Myers said that the defunding of police departments could lead to the end of the school resource officers.

“The other piece of it is, if we pull the SROs out, we still need to find ways that our police are positively engaging the youth in our community,” she said. “There are ways we can build upon that program and make it more beneficial ... maybe it’s an adaptation of what their roles are in the school, but I think it’s worth having some discussion before making a sweeping change to pull them out of the schools.”

Martirano said he wants to meet with Ball, the Board of Education, Myers, State’s Attorney Rich Gibson and community leaders to have a dialogue with the community about the officers.

“Based on the conversations that are occurring in light of the death of George Floyd, there is a tremendous opportunity for us, as educators, to lead conversations that seek to build understanding, empathy, and acceptance and ultimately work toward solutions that benefit the entire community,” Martirano said.

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## CONTACT

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Ana Faguy covers Howard County government. Previously, she has reported for Maryland Matters, in addition to completing internships with NBC Washington and the European Parliament. Ana is a 2019 graduate of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. She joined Baltimore Sun Media in 2019 and is a native of Montgomery County, Maryland.