

Support S.297
AN ACT FURTHER DEFINING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS
(Senator Patricia D. Jehlen)

Throughout the Commonwealth, and nationally, there is growing awareness of a tendency to **arrest and prosecute public school students** for conduct that once resulted in a talking-to from the school principal. These well-documented practices **discriminate against students of color and with disabilities**, fueling what is known as the “**school-to-prison pipeline**.” Unnecessary arrest causes serious harm to students and wastes criminal justice resources.

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between school and police departments are required by a recent change in law. But the new law offers no guidance on what MOUs should say. It will not **require any change in current MOUs, even those that explicitly allow police to enforce school policy**. Practices in districts where students are **routinely handcuffed in front of other students**, often for “mouthing off” or even just running in the hallway, are unaffected.

S.297, which tracks federal guidance, will help bring school arrest practices under control. It requires that preference in school assignments be given to **police officers with relevant expertise** in child development, behavioral health, and conflict avoidance. And the bill would require MOUs:

- To focus police attention on **school safety** and not school discipline;
- Establish protocols for appropriate use of mental health professionals;
- Assure adequate performance review and **accountability**;
- Require **training to focus** on enhancing officers’ understanding of **students’ lives**;
- Require collection and publication of **arrest data** in the manner of other school discipline data.

Preventing unnecessary arrest makes sense:

- **Arresting students for minor offenses is counter-productive:** Arrest and court referral closely correlate to student drop out. Drop outs earn less, pay less in taxes, use more state-funded services, and are imprisoned more often (70% in MA prisons are high school drop outs);
- **Arresting students ruins lives:** Students are labeled as criminals even when charges are minor and are dismissed, limiting future educational and employment options;
- **Arresting students is unfair:** Discrimination is not limited to disability and race. School arrests predominate in poorer cities. Students in other districts will get help, not handcuffed;
- **Students will fare better in school:** New MOUs in other jurisdictions inspired positive changes in school culture that research shows is linked to academic performance. Not only did arrests decline both in and outside of school, but graduation rates increased;
- **Schools are safer when SROs focus on serious misconduct:** When students are not concerned about petty arrests, they are more likely to provide information on real threats. In other jurisdictions this led to a dramatic reduction in weapons possession.

S.297 is co-sponsored by: Senators William Brownsberger and James Eldridge; and by Representatives Marjorie Decker; Ruth Balse; James O’Day; James Cantwell; Gloria Fox; Byron Rushing; Tom Sannicandro; Jonathan Hecht; Kay Khan; Mary Keefe

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