



**Testimony for the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Committee
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**SB 223 – State Department of Education – Guidelines on Trauma-Informed
Approach**

SUPPORT

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The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 223 which establishes a trauma-informed schools initiative within the Maryland State Department of Education, in collaboration with Maryland Department of Health and the Department of Human Services, to develop guidelines on a trauma-informed approach and training for school-based staff. We believe that in order for schools to have safe and secure learning environments, school staff, school police, and security staff should be equipped with the latest research and knowledge to engage with a variety of discipline situations. A trauma-informed approach would transform the school climate by supporting staff members of the school community to understand student behaviors and appropriately interact with students. We suggest adding definitions for implicit bias and cultural competency to strengthen the bill, as a disproportionate number of students of color and students with disabilities receive harsher consequences for behavior issues, which intensive staff training will seek to rectify.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The ACLU fights to end the “school-to-prison pipeline” which occurs when policies and practices push students out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems by criminalizing childish behavior. Creating trauma-informed guidelines is an important step to discipline reform because commitment to understanding these concepts could substantially help teachers. Robust training on implicit bias and cultural competency will help create fairness and lower the number of police interactions that result in arrest.

Impact of Toxic Stress on Development

We are deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of all students. Recent research by the National Survey of Children’s Health¹ indicates that 46 percent of children under the age of 17 have experienced at least one traumatic event. Early

¹ Bethell, C. D., Newacheck, P., Hawes, E., & Halfon, N. (2014). Changing epidemiology of children’s health. Adverse childhood experiences: Assessing the impact on health and school engagement and the mitigating role of resilience. *Health Affairs*, 33(12), 2106–2115. <https://doi-org.proxy-hs.researchport.umd.edu/10.1377/hlthaff.2014.0914>

exposure to this type of trauma can severely impact a child's brain development and negatively impact their academic success and ability to thrive well into adulthood. Schools trained in a trauma-informed approach have the ability to recognize the signs of trauma in a child and provide early intervention methods to significantly enhance the course of a child's overall development and success in life.

Schools Trained in a Trauma-Informed Approach Can Help Transform School Climate

By implementing positive comprehensive trauma-informed policies, educators can appropriately respond to student misconduct in the classroom from a child who may or may not be exhibiting signs of trauma. Staff will also be equipped with the knowledge to implement restorative practices that will enhance classroom management and cultivate a positive learning environment for all students. Several states throughout the nation that have passed guidelines establishing Trauma-Informed School Initiatives and have seen an increase in student academic achievement and a decrease in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.²

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Implicit Bias and Cultural Competency

When paired with punitive disciplinary methods, students of color, students living with disabilities, and additional marginalized student populations may experience re-traumatization in schools that are not trained in trauma-informed care.³ To compact these injustices, we believe it is pertinent that staff receive training in implicit bias and cultural competency. When paired together with training in trauma-informed care, staff can recognize instances where re-traumatization can occur and work to foster a positive learning environment for all students.

Conclusion

The school environment will be safer if schools work to transform and maintain a positive school climate. The guidelines on a trauma-informed approach provides the opportunity to develop stronger skills for teachers that will help with students and become a resource for administrators. It is also a stronger tool for teachers to manage classrooms and build long lasting positive relationships with their students. Strong relationships in the classroom, and in the halls, equates to more learning and better outcomes.

For these reasons, the ACLU of Maryland urges this committee to **SUPPORT SB223**.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (DHHS/PHS). (2011). Helping children and youth who have experienced traumatic events. National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day--May 3, 2011. HHS Publication Number SMA-11-4642. *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*. Retrieved from <http://survey.hshsl.umaryland.edu/?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-hs.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED525061&site=eds-live>

³ Equal Justice Society. (2018). Breaking the chains. Retrieved from <https://equaljusticesociety.org/breakingthechains/>