

July 11, 2017

Joint Committee on the Judiciary  
Massachusetts State Legislature  
The Statehouse  
Boston, MA 02108

**RE: Support for SB 876**

Dear Members of the Joint Committee of the Judiciary:

Strategies for Youth, Inc. strongly urges the Committee to favorably vote out Senate Bill 876, an Act Decriminalizing Non-Violent and Verbal Student Misconduct.

Strategies for Youth (SFY) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to improving police/youth interactions and reducing disproportionate minority contact. SFY works with law enforcement agencies across the United States, and train officers to use developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, equitable approaches to policing youth. SFY also develops agency and officer standards to promote a positive youth development approach and to ensure accountability of both officers and agencies in their treatment and protection of youth.

SFY strongly supports SB 876 for its recommendation that law enforcement agencies and school districts prepare MOUs that limit the use of traditional policing techniques to circumstances where safety is at risk, require protocols that involves mental health providers, require training for officers so that they use developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, equitable approaches to policing youth, and development oversight and publicly accessible data systems.

On behalf of SFY, I write to make three key points:

**1) Arresting Children for Non-Safety Offenses Increases Problems & Fuels the School to Prison Pipeline**

It should be axiomatic that we do not want to arrest children and we do not want to arrest them in the schools of the Commonwealth. A commitment to avoid arrest for defiance and “disturbing lawful assemblies” in school is the key strategy to stop youth going into the school to prison pipeline. As multiple reports have shown, including that of Citizens for Juvenile Justice, the school to prison pipeline is flowing in Massachusetts and disproportionately funnels black and brown youth into the juvenile justice system.

Under Massachusetts law, children as young as 7 can be arrested. Is it truly in the interest of the schools or the police, much less public safety, to arrest children that young for expressing verbal or non-violent acts of defiance?

## **2) Massachusetts' Police Chiefs' Opposition to this Bill Reflects a Deviation from National Police Leadership Positions on this Topic**

The statewide opposition to this bill from police chiefs is startling.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) strongly supports the reduction of use of arrests for all non-violent, verbal disciplinary issues. Indeed, the IACP's report<sup>1</sup> on recommended policies and practices for policing youth states three key conclusions:

1. "School completion must be a central goal of school safety, discipline, and truancy policies."
2. It is "indispensable to achieve positive outcomes for individual youth and public safety as a whole."
3. The public must "[E]nsure that law enforcement presence in schools does not contribute to a school to prison pipeline and that policies and practices do not lead to disparities based on race or ethnic background."

No doubt, that's why cities like Los Angeles and Philadelphia have adopted such practices and reduced arrests without a concomitant increase in crime, disorder, or system breakdown.

There is so much research that demonstrates the short and long term harms of school-based arrest, primary among them dropping out of school, that it is hard to understand why law enforcement leaders would want to promote policies that will place more youth, unsupervised on the streets rather than keep them in school.

## **3) SB 876 Shores Up Existing Legislation & Programming**

Massachusetts, traditionally a leader in education reform, demonstrated its leadership status by being the first state in the nation to promote, implement and fund trauma-informed approaches to educating youth. Massachusetts' approach is distinguished nationally for training teachers how to recognize, respond to and educate children who, through no fault of their own, are traumatized.

Since so many sources of trauma result from adult and authority figures in children's lives, resulting from domestic and community violence and divorce, it's key that adults who work with Massachusetts children understand how exposure to trauma affects a child's ability to learn and grow.

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<sup>1</sup> **Law Enforcement's Leadership Role in Juvenile Justice Reform: Actionable Recommendations for Practice & Policy**, July 2014.

Therefore, it is hard to understand how the legislature supports so many cutting edge approaches to reducing trauma for children, and yet permits the use of arrest, a major source of trauma, for non-violent, verbal disciplinary behaviors.

These are irreconcilable and opposing policies that place students in the middle of traumatic occasions that again the result of adult authority figures. They should be harmonized.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns and please feel free to contact me if you would be willing to discuss this matter in greater detail.

Very truly yours,

Lisa H. Thureau,  
Executive Director