

Aissa Dearing

706 Colonial Street, Durham, NC 27701

(919) 717-9444

aissa.dearing@gmail.com

5th June 2020

Dear Superintendent Pascal Mubenga and Chairman Mike Lee,

My name is Aissa Dearing, and I am a graduating high school senior at JDC Early College High School. I have been a student of Durham Public Schools for 13 years. During these 13 years, I have both witnessed and been a party to interventions by Student Resource Officers (SROs) that escalate situations with students in the name of school safety. These situations could have been better addressed by counselors, social workers, and others with a background in working with children rather than law enforcement. I have addressed this issue during School Board meetings for the past couple of years -- but now we must act with deliberate speed. I am asking as a concerned former student of Durham Public Schools that **the Board of Education must immediately terminate its Memorandum of Understanding and discontinue any partnership with the Durham County Sheriff's Department.**

SROs are trained in law enforcement (limited information is available on how SROs are trained, selected, and held accountable due to lack of transparency).¹ However, **social workers, psychologists, and counselors are specifically trained to de-escalate student issues.** If these well-qualified staff were on the frontline addressing student behavioral issues, it would result in far better outcomes for the students. Instead of suspensions and legal charges, students could be taught to practice coping skills and continue to receive an education.

Policing as an institution is a fundamental remnant of slavery that has metamorphosized into the school-to-prison pipeline. According to the 2018 Racial Equity Report Card reported by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, 15.6% of juvenile complaints taken to court were school-based, and of those school-based complaints, 90% of the students were black.² Black students make up approximately 45% of the Durham Public Schools population. **Schools should have more appropriate disciplinary techniques** (that include restorative practice centers)³ **that are more equipped to handle any student issues than any intervention from law enforcement.** In extreme situations, it is then that schools should ask for peacekeeping intervention.

There is no evidence that more training and oversight for SROs will improve the overall school climate.⁴ Therefore, **Durham Public Schools must reallocate resources elsewhere, especially during a pandemic -- which has had traumatic effects on the Durham community.** What Durham schools need (and what I needed while I was in school) are on-site therapists, psychologists, school nurses, social workers, career counselors, guidance counselors, substance abuse specialists, sexual health educators, and restorative practice centers. If safety and public health are intrinsically linked, then why are we asking SROs to fill these roles?

Sincerely,

Aissa Dearing, JDC Early College High School, Class of 2020

¹https://www.southerncoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/YJP_Recommendations-on-School-Policing.pdf

²<https://www.southerncoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019-RERC-Durhamh.pdf>

³<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis>

⁴<https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/school-resource-officers.pdf>