

# Maryland school district signs backroom agreement to bring police back into public schools after community referendum removed them

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Officials in Montgomery County, Maryland, have recently proposed a program to reintroduce armed police officers in schools after students and the community demanded their removal during the eruption of international protests following the police murder of George Floyd in 2020.

Many Montgomery County students joined protests against police brutality and racism with a particular focus was on local arrest rates in county schools, which disproportionately occur in schools in working class neighborhoods. Students demanded the removal of armed police officers, euphemistically named Student Resource Officers (SRO), from Montgomery County Public Schools. Democratic County Executive Marc Elrich responded by rescinding funding for the SRO program in the fall of 2021 when students returned to in-person classes.

Elrich implemented what was called a “Community Engagement Officer” program in which police officers patrolled certain areas around schools and only responded to incidents if urgently needed. This program was an attempt at complying with Maryland law requiring that all schools have “adequate law enforcement coverage,” while assuaging student and community concerns about having police in school buildings.

Montgomery County, which includes the northern suburbs of Washington D.C., is one of the 20 richest counties in the United States by median income. The county is home not only to the National Institutes of Health and Walter Reed Medical Center but also several other federal agencies and corporate

headquarters of defense contractors like Lockheed Martin.

The county government is firmly in the control of the Democratic Party, with six of seven county executives having been Democrats since the creation of the office in 1970 and with a county council currently composed entirely of Democrats.

The *Washington Post* reported the existence of a privately drafted agreement between the county school system and the Montgomery County Police Department to bring the armed officers back inside school buildings. Based on a review of the agreement, which has not been made public, the *Post* said the deal could be signed this week.

According to the *Post*, county leaders and members of the county council have received their own copies of the draft agreement. However, discussions have taken place entirely behind the backs of the community, including groups that previously pushed for the removal of the school police.

Moreover, under the draft agreement, the presence of armed officers would not only be commonplace in public high schools, as it was prior to the 2021 decision to scrap the SRO program, but officers would be placed in both middle and elementary schools as well.

“We are now going to have officers who are going to be more visible,” said Montgomery Police Chief Marcus Jones to WJLA. “They will be visible around the high-volume times our students will be walking on campus, at the beginning of school, around lunchtime and at the end of school,” Jones added. In addition, the draft agreement includes a proposal for officers to have

their own “private designated space” within schools even if they are not “permanently stationed” there. It also allows school administrators to call the officers directly.

Last year, a task force formed by the county executive concluded that there was no need to station police officers inside school buildings. Furthermore, it recommended against school administrators having direct lines of contact with the Community Engagement Officers that replaced SROs. Schools could not call them directly to respond to incidents but had to call emergency services.

Richard Montgomery High School senior Kyson Taylor, a student activist, told the *Post* that it was “wildly inappropriate” that the decision had been arranged in closed-door negotiations. Taylor and other students were in the midst of organizing protests against a proposal from Interim Superintendent Monifa McKnight made in February to bring police back into school buildings. Students have organized protests in opposition to the new proposal. Montgomery Community Media (MCM) reported that students held vigils and rallies in February and March to denounce the plan.

Danielle Blocker, the president of Youth People for Progress, called the county leadership hypocritical, adding, “For them to go from saying last year that this [document] is something that students and teachers and administrators and community groups should have eyes on to saying now that they’re fine with no student input—it’s striking. How do you even begin to justify this process as legitimate?”

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) spokesperson Chris Cram maintained that the draft was not supposed to become public knowledge until after it had been signed.

Elrich’s spokesperson, Scott Peterson, told the *Post*, “MCPS has been clear that they need additional flexibility in the short term.” Peterson added that Elrich would have made the draft document public had he been able to, but he “cannot make such a decision alone.”

While the about-face is causing outrage among students, educators and parents, it is associated with the authoritarian turn which both the Democratic and Republican parties have embraced during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Montgomery County,

students have held large protests in recent months against the unsafe reopening of schools during the pandemic. Significantly, students reported MCPS’s use of security officers to watch over and warehouse students during school hours.

In addition, the Democrats in particular have pivoted toward a focus on law-and-order policies and combating the so-called “wave” of shootings and other violent crimes which have risen in the course of the pandemic. This was typified by comments given by Democratic President Biden at his State of the Union address in March. “We should all agree: The answer is not to defund the police. It’s to fund the police,” he said.

Montgomery County’s Democratic Council President Gabe Albornoz underscored how the impact of the pandemic on youth was being used to justify the increase police presence in schools. At a press conference on March 28, Albornoz said, “Several things have changed. ... [S]ince the pandemic we have learned about the really significant challenges facing our youth in the area of behavioral health and in social and emotional learning,” he declared.

This anti-democratic episode again shows the right-wing character of the Democratic Party even in a liberal stronghold like Montgomery County, Maryland.



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