



March 25, 2021

The Honorable Ayanna Pressley
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Pressley:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions, to thank you for introducing the Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act (HR.7484) and express support for the bill.

Schools should represent a caring and nurturing space for children to learn and grow. In recent years, there has been a welcomed turn towards the importance of socioemotional learning, and an underlining of the importance of prioritizing kids' mental health. A recognition of rampant criminalization processes within schoolhouse walls has brought a needed focus on how to make schools into sanctuaries of education.

The processes of criminalization have a disproportionate effect on Black and brown students, immigrant students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, low-income students, and other marginalized populations. Punitive measures and school surveillance – such as suspensions, zero-tolerance policies, and metal detectors– coupled with police presence, creates an environment which conflates discipline and law enforcement. This is evident in the story of Grace, a Michigan teen jailed for not completing her homework.

But these conditions are staples of low-income school districts, leading to more arrests and instances of police violence against kids already experiencing the adversity posed by economic hardship. According to Justice Policy Institute, disturbing videos and stories of students abused by police in schools are indicative of a wider problem: police do not make schools safer, [they make them more dangerous](#). We must move from an ethos of punishment and surveillance to an ethos of care.

We applaud this bill for proposing to create a \$2.5 billion grant program that enables school districts to “replace law enforcement officers with adequately trained personnel like counselors, social workers, nurses, mental health practitioners and trauma informed personnel.” Prioritizing healing, instead of punishing, treating students like partners in the learning process, rather than antagonists, has been shown to help kids learn, not least by keeping them in the classroom rather than suspending and excluding.

By proposing to shift funding for police in schools in favor of social workers and counselors, the Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act takes two actions. It combats police presence in schools which often results in escalated violence. At once, it supports teachers, staff, and students in realizing a compassionate, kind school environment conducive to learning. More funding for counseling will help kids and teachers build a shared school community. It has been inspirational to see many communities, including [Milwaukee](#), [Seattle](#), and [Oakland](#), take action to push for the diminishing and ending of police presence in schools. We look forward to working with you to get this bill passed into law and thank you for your leadership.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a blue ink color.

Bruce Lesley
President