

Wednesday, May 19, 2010

## Why are we cutting school officer program?

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As a high school PTSA president I am very concerned with the proposal to cut the county educational facilities officers program in half. We all understand that the county faces severe budget challenges this year and that painful cuts will have to be made, but it just does not make sense to risk our children's safety by cutting the EFO program this way. The EFO program has been extremely successful in promoting the safety of our students, which in turn has kept our communities safer.

At Springbrook High School, we know firsthand how valuable this program is. In 2009, Springbrook cluster Officer Rodney Barnes uncovered a bomb plot targeting our principal by being available to students who felt comfortable sharing information about the plot with him. This is but one of a half dozen recent incidents where an EFO's intervention averted a devastating outcome. In fact, a recent county memorandum described the EFO program as "a great investigative and crime prevention tool." So, why are we cutting it in half?

The police department and the County Council's Public Safety Committee assure us that safety can be provided with only 17 officers responsible for the 45,000 students in 25 high schools. But they don't yet know how those 17 officers will be assigned. The only options are either to withdraw an EFO from some schools or require EFOs to cover more than one high school simultaneously. Can we really feel confident selecting eight schools that will go without this important safety protection? Which schools do you select and what would you tell them if, God forbid, a serious security incident were to occur at that school?

Others have suggested that vice principals and/or school security staff can do the job of the EFOs. Our administrators already have enough to do to educate our students. They can't take on the responsibility of investigating crimes or assuring school security against outside threats. And our school security personnel serve a different purpose within our schools. They are not trained to do the jobs performed by uniformed, commissioned police officers today.

If we have learned anything in the past few years, we now know that anything is possible in Montgomery County. Our current students have experienced lockdowns due to Sept. 11, snipers, and hurricanes. We also have seen enough reports of dangerous youth activities across all our communities to know that EFO coverage at every high school is a requirement, not a luxury. The school system has assumed the lion's share of the cost of this program for next year. The police department should allocate enough additional resources to ensure that every high school has an EFO assigned to it.

Dollars are scarce; common sense should not be.

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