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**FRANCESCA HONG**  
State Representative · 76th Assembly District

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February 10th, 2022

Dear Members of the Assembly Committee on Education,

Assembly Bill 969 uses emergency funding, intended for public health use, to criminalize Wisconsin children. Armed law enforcement officers do not address the root causes of school distributions. In fact, especially for Black students and students of color, the presence of SROs has been proven by continuous and expansive research to have detrimental consequences on the learning environment.

According to the US Department of Education, Wisconsin students with disabilities and students of color bear the brunt of school policing. ***In the 2017-18 school year Wisconsin was more likely than any other state in the country to refer Native students to law enforcement, reporting a rate over three times higher than the rate of referral for their white peers - with referrals for Black students not far behind.*** (<https://wisconsinwatch.org/>).

Research shows that our most at-risk youth disproportionately bear the negative effects of criminalization by school policing. SROs are therefore not a 'neutral' option. If our schools operate as a criminal legal system & prioritize behavioral control over learning, they are going to perpetuate disturbances rather than curb them.

*Instead of meeting disturbances with violence, we must address the underlying issues that cause behavioral outbursts in the first place. Increased investment in mental health, youth programming, counseling, and the many other important services Wisconsin schools try to provide will not only reduce disturbances but prevent them from happening from the outset.*

It is a shame that our state has been, for years, systematically defunding public education in Wisconsin. As we've seen in Madison, this has consequences; neglecting the very real trauma of our students and teachers comes at a cost. We must pursue policy that cares and supports not punishes and polices – our schools are not jails.

Moreover, overall police calls to Madison-area schools have steadily declined from 2015 through the present. There is no doubt that the stressors of the COVID pandemic, economic fatigue, and a myriad of other societal stressors have impacted our students and have lent to the recent spike in schoolyard fights. In order to truly keep Wisconsin safe and not just offer a reactionary response, we must treat this as a public health crisis.

Our students deserve agency, they deserve care, and they deserve to feel safe in the classroom. Defunding education was our first mistake, this bill will be second.

I urge you, as representative for one of the most diverse and beautiful school districts in our state, to vote against AB 969.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Francesca Hong  
State Representative, 76th Assembly District



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Assembly Committee on Education  
Public Hearing on Assembly Bill 969  
February 10, 2022

Thank you Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 969, which requires certain schools to employ school resource officers and allocates American Rescue Plan Act funding.

Kids and teachers deserve to feel safe in schools, and should have a learning environment that allows them to flourish. As staff and students navigate the classroom with the changes that have occurred over the last two years, safety should be prioritized, not reduced.

According to a survey conducted by the Fordham Institute, over half of teachers in high-poverty schools said that disorderly and unsafe environments in schools make learning more difficult for many students and student behavioral problems are a contributing factor. Sixty-six percent of teachers said the school discipline policy was inconsistently enforced, and nearly half said that they did not have the needed administrative support, resulting in teachers potentially being responsible for handling altercations and offensive behavior.

Violent incidents in schools increased by 185% from the 2016-2017 school year to the 2018-2019 school year.



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Even as school violence is increasing, school districts in Wisconsin and across the country are removing school resource officers from schools. For example, in the summer of 2020 the Madison Metropolitan School District school board voted to remove school resource officers from Madison schools. Yet the Madison police were called 63 times in the first few months of the 2021 school year. There was also an incident when multiple fights broke out this fall at Madison East High School that required the Madison police to be called. This event resulted in one third of the students staying home from school the following day for fear ~~as rumors spread~~ of more violence in the coming days.

Wisconsin was not unique when it comes to school violence. As students returned to in-person learning, headlines across the country read of violent incidents occurring at school. The Department of Homeland Security warned in May of this year, “isolation is among the risk factors for students who commit violent acts in schools.” Violence became such a problem that multiple schools temporarily held virtual learning as they attempted to deescalate threats and fights taking place at school.

Assembly Bill 969 directs school districts to report certain incidents that occur in school buildings or on school grounds to local law enforcement. If 100 or more incidents occur in and on public school buildings and grounds in a semester, and at least 25 of those incidents result in an arrest, the school must hire a school resource officer (SRO) the following school year.



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The bill also allocates federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, to reimburse school districts for the costs of employing SRO's.

The bill specifies that 75% of costs for a school resource officer be reimbursed in the 2022-23 school year, 50% of costs in the 2023-24 school year and 25% of costs in 2024-25.

Thank you for your time today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.



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February 10, 2022

Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Assembly Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Assembly Bill 969, a proposal by Representative Duchow regarding the reporting of safety incidents to law enforcement to ensure that students are safe when attending school. I am Libby Sobic from the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty.

Student safety continues to a high priority for both parents and students. A multi-year survey by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee asks Milwaukee Public School students, among other things, about their feelings of safety across a number of different dimensions including in hallways, classrooms, bathrooms, and walking to school.<sup>1</sup> Many students reported that they felt “not safe” in a number of locations in and around their school. On average, MPS students reported feeling “not safe” hallways, bathrooms, and outside the school at the highest percentages.

This is not only a Milwaukee challenge. WILL analyzed the 911 data from Madison Metropolitan School District between 2012-2019. Our report found that five schools in Madison averaged more than fifteen 911 calls per year for every 100 students.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. 911 Calls per 100 Students, Madison**

Lowest Calls		Highest Calls	
School Name	Incident Rate	School Name	Incident Rate
Shorewood Hills Elementary	0.18276	La Follette High	15.20088
Nuestro Mundo	0.189215	East High	18.72348
Van Hise Elementary	0.683371	Memorial High	18.94521
Stephens Elementary	2.199793	Shabazz High	19.32773
Muir Elementary	2.423469	Badger Rock Middle	25.04202

Growing safety concerns in Wisconsin schools are made all the more serious by school district policies that make it far more difficult for teachers to keep control of their classrooms. Political correctness, along with the heavy hand of the federal government under the Obama

<sup>1</sup> Using School Climate data to Improve Milwaukee Public Schools, <https://www.udisp.com/schools>

<sup>2</sup> Two Madisons, WILL, September 2019, <https://will-law.org/study-madisons-low-income-minority-students-attend-unsafe-failing-schools/>



administration, led school districts to implement alternative discipline plans that often see misbehaving students kept in the classroom. And these policies don't work. A study last year from WILL found that as suspension rates in a school go down, student reports of feeling unsafe in school go *up*.<sup>3</sup>

The natural result of this is more classroom disruptions, which makes it harder for other students in the class to learn. A 2018 WILL study found that proficiency rates were lower in Wisconsin school districts that implemented lighter discipline policies.<sup>4</sup> Many of the schools suffering from behavioral issues also have large numbers of minority students, which only serves to exacerbate Wisconsin's racial achievement gap.

When it comes to student success in school, safety comes before any concerns about academics, athletics, or AP classes. If a student doesn't feel safe, their learning is impeded. Yet across the state, there have been news reports about safety incidents happening on school grounds. For example, in the last few weeks, there have been shootings at public schools in both Milwaukee and Beloit.

It is high time that the legislature take action to do what school districts are seemingly unwilling to do themselves—provide a safe environment for the next generation to learn.

Thank you,

Libby Sobic

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Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

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<sup>3</sup> Suspended Reality. WILL. October 2021. <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SuspensionStudy.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Collateral Damage. WILL. January 2018. <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/pbis-final.pdf>