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Local News

Baltimore expands 'Safe Passage' program monitoring students commuting from school



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Baltimore is expanding a program to monitor students commuting home to areas near 10 schools, officials said at a City Council committee meeting Wednesday.

Last summer, Mayor Brandon Scott launched the Safe Passage Baltimore initiative as a pilot, describing it as a program meant to make students traveling home from school safer.

The program's first iteration focused on monitoring students near State Center and Mondawmin bus and subway stations after school.

Over the past school year, officials from Baltimore Police, Baltimore City Schools, the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success and Baltimore City Schools Police have collected data, including aggravated assaults and robberies, within a 2-mile radius of certain schools.

Officials also spoke with business owners, students and parents about their experiences near schools between the hours of 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.

"What we heard repeatedly is that young people felt safe within the school building, but oftentimes, they didn't feel safe traveling from school," said Debra Brooks, executive director of the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success.

Sometimes, feeling unsafe meant that students didn't attend class, she said.

Beginning when the school year started two weeks ago, staff from five community-based organizations have been sporting orange vests as they watch out for kids walking home from school or to transit stations. School police and staff also will be present in these areas.

The new zones under the expanded program are Academy for College Career Exploration, Carver Vocational Technical School, Digital Harbor High School, Edmondson-Westside High School, Frederick Douglass High School @ Northwestern High School, Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School, Patterson High School and the campus that encompasses Reginald F. Lewis High School, Achievement Academy and Success Academy.

The schools were chosen based on Baltimore Police and City Schools Police data showing "student-involved incidents" in nearby areas.

The program's total cost is \$525,000, funded this year by the Family League of Baltimore. That figure pays the five community-based organizations — Movement Team, YALA, Peace Team, We Our Us and

Redesigning Minds LLC – responsible for staffing the zones near different schools.

To measure success, program leaders will look for a decrease in business and resident calls related to students, an increase in student attendance and a decrease in violence within a 2-mile radius of schools.

“It’s not to police our young people but so that our young people know that they can be safe traveling, but also so that it’s a deterrent, so they know not to engage in any type of what could possibly be inappropriate behavior,” Brooks told the City Council’s public safety committee.

Four of those schools – Digital Harbor, Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical, Carver Vocational-Technical and Edmondson-Westside – are also part of a long-awaited school-violence intervention pilot program led by the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement.

“We probably couldn’t have picked for more different schools across the city,” MONSE Director Stefanie Mavronis said. “We understand that this design will have to be very tailored and adapted to each of these particular school climates.”

The schools have chosen the community-based organizations whose members will staff the pilot programs, some of them the same organizations hired for Safe Passage, Mavronis said. Members of those organizations will choose “student ambassadors” for the program before the end of this year. They also will work to help students develop conflict resolution skills, carry out mediations and counsel students considered high-risk.

In response to a question from public safety committee chair Councilman Mark Conway about how the program’s success will be measured, Mavronis said MONSE will look closely at instances of violence, including fights at school, and changes in the “trajectories” of students’ lives.

This article has been updated to correct the names of We Our Us and the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement.

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