

Good evening members of the City Council,

My name is Natalia Skolnik. I live in Baltimore City, District 11.

I'm writing tonight as an educator and advocate for better opportunities for our youth and as a mother of a Baltimore City Public Schools student. Baltimore youth deserve to grow up in a city that invests heavily in them, not in the police.

First, I want to honor a bright and amazing fifteen year old youth leader from East Baltimore who showed my colleagues at CLIA and me such a beautiful and healing vision for Baltimore. Devonte Friedman joined us for our Summer Leadership Institute the summer of 2016. By the time I met him, half of his close friends, had been lost to gun violence. He didn't want that for himself; was thirsty for leadership and educational opportunities, and he begged for help finding after school programs that he could join so he didn't meet the same fate. He was delightfully curious about everything. I called everyone I could think of and could not find an after school program, apprenticeship program or internships he could join. On December 1st, 2018, he was killed. Baltimore City, Devonte didn't need to die. This was a preventable death, as are the hundreds of other young men and women we lose every year.

Second, I recently attended our daughter's Baltimore public school's budget meeting for next year. It became quickly apparent that the school can barely offer our students the barest minimum requirements in terms of staffing with current funding levels. I'm sure many Baltimore City schools are in worse positions than ours, but it's dire. We are an "IB Candidate school" and up for certification next year for a program that our teachers have lovingly been working for years to build, but with the lack of funding, I am doubtful we'll pass the requirements because we're told they cannot afford to hire the necessary staff required to fully implement the program. Baltimore, we can do better. Baltimore, we must do better. For all of our kids. We cannot do this as individuals. We can only decide this as a city. And the time to do that is now.

It is said that our budget reflects what we value. Let me add: it shows *who* and *what* we value. Why do we intentionally give millions more each year to our police department than we invest in our children's education – in school and after school programming? We all know after school programs keep kids off the streets and teach valuable life skills. If we continue to budget to deny school programming and other enrichment opportunities for the youth of our city, we are blatantly deciding their lives don't matter. We might as well write that on a banner. Writing "Black Lives Matter" on a banner on a building or on a t-shirt only means something when we put our resources into action.

If our city wants different outcomes (families to stay here, youth to thrive and a reduction in youth crime), the formula is simple. Our kids need OUR CITY to CHOOSE THEM (not the police department). Our kids need our city to invest in their growth, their education, their lives. We need to support, protect, love our kids. We need to insist our resources go to them, not flushed away by handing millions upon millions to the police department. The future of the children who are alive today depend on this.

Baltimore, we can do better. Baltimore City Council, please *do* better.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,
Natalia Skolnik