

## SB 54 Disproportionately Impacts Our Most Vulnerable Students

IDRA Testimony Against Senate Bill 54, Submitted by DeAndrea Byrd, to the Georgia Senate Education and Youth Committee, March 5, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson and members of the committee:

My name is DeAndrea Byrd, I am an IDRA Education Policy Fellow. IDRA is an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

I am here today as a parent of three, the child of educators, an education advocate, and community leader to express my strong opposition to Senate Bill 54. While I share the goal of ensuring school safety with the author, I am deeply concerned that this bill will inadvertently worsen the school-to-prison pipeline and harm the very students it aims to protect.

First, I want to address the definition of safety. *Safety* is a relative term. It does not mean the same thing for all students. Black and Brown children do not just worry about external threats like school shootings; they also fear being over-policed, over-disciplined, and pushed out of the education system. The same system meant to protect them often criminalizes them instead. This bill, by tracking and flagging students in a state database, would not make schools safer for all. It simply would make it easier for some children to be labeled, watched and punished instead of being supported.

SB 54 proposes the creation of a statewide threat database, where students can be flagged for making threats, even before due process or a full investigation is completed. This raises serious equity and fairness concerns. Research has shown that Black and Latino students, students with disabilities, and those from marginalized communities are disproportionately labeled as threats due to implicit bias in school discipline.

The creation of a statewide threat database is especially concerning for its potential impact on students with disabilities including those with IEPs and 504 plans. These students may struggle with emotional regulation, communication, or impulse control, and they are already more likely to face disciplinary actions that misinterpret their disabilities as defiance or aggression.

Without proper safeguards, this bill will put children with disabilities under constant surveillance rather than providing the individualized support they are legally entitled to under federal law. How will this bill ensure that a meltdown is not mistaken for a malicious threat? How will it protect students with learning and behavioral disabilities from being disproportionately targeted?

Black students in Georgia are 3.4 times more likely to face disciplinary actions compared to their peers, while students with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely to be disciplined than their non-disabled counterparts. Without proper safeguards, we risk making this worse.

If and when this database is misused as we have seen in other states, we could be creating a digital record that follows students for years, impacting their educational opportunities and potentially criminalizing them, with no option for recourse, revision, or restoration.

Additionally, I am deeply concerned about the surveillance aspect of this bill. Schools should not be militarized spaces.

We must ask: Who controls this database? How long does a student stay on it? Who has access to this sensitive information?

SB 54 claims to offer mental health services to flagged students, but let's be honest, Georgia's schools are already severely underfunded when it comes to mental health support. Instead of putting students on a watchlist, we should be investing in counselors, social workers and restorative justice practices that address behavioral concerns at the root, rather than punishing students after the fact. It is time to shift from a trauma informed after-care to healing centered engagement.

This legislation moves us toward data collection and tracking of children in ways that raise serious privacy concerns. When we start keeping digital records of perceived "threats," we create a system of pre-criminalization, where students – especially Black, Latino and disabled students – are branded as threats before they have even had a fair chance. The information in this database could follow them through their entire education journey, making it harder for them to get second chances and even impacting future opportunities. We must be careful not to turn schools into places of surveillance and policing rather than learning and growth.

If we truly want to create safe schools, then we must stop treating students like suspects and start investing in what actually works: mental health professionals, restorative justice practices, trauma-informed interventions, and adequate funding for school counselors and social workers. Safety does not come from tracking, policing or creating digital records of student behavior. It comes from creating environments where students feel seen, supported and valued.

We must ask: Will this bill make our schools safer, or will it create more pathways for students – especially Black and Latino students – to be funneled into the juvenile justice system? We cannot afford to pass policies that, however well-intended, reinforce systemic inequities.

I urge this committee to vote against Senate Bill 54 and instead pursue policies that prioritize student well-being, educational equity, and privacy over punitive surveillance. I also urge this committee to involve actual students and parents in the decision-making process.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed., Georgia Advocacy Director, at mikayla.arciaga@idra.org.

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