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Governing Your

We're All Part Of The Safety Team

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With the continuation of high profile school shootings in the United States, the issue of whether and how to engage law enforcement in schools has been raised to a new level of discussion. Communities must decide whether they want to employ School Resource Officers (SROs), and, if so, how they go about it in the most effective way by developing positive relationships with students and collaboration with educators and mental health professionals to proactively address school safety issues and divert at-risk students from the juvenile justice system. Implementing effective SRO programs that support the positive development of youth is an essential part of juvenile justice reform.

If students and educators are to achieve their full potential, schools must be safe and feel safe. Students that report feeling safe in school are more engaged in class, have higher academic achievement, and have lower rates of absenteeism, truancy, and behavioral issues. Educators also benefit from safe schools. Those educators who report feeling safe in school are better able to focus on academics, are more likely to remain in their positions, and are better equipped to teach and support students. Simply put, feeling safe in school is connected to achieving educational outcomes for students.

Many communities seek the help of law enforcement to promote school safety and protect schools from violence. SRO programs that are implemented and sustained through a well-conceived, organized and comprehensive process can help prevent school-based violence, connect at-risk students to needed services, divert youth from juvenile court, and create safe, secure, and peaceful school environments.

Effective school-based law enforcement programs require more than simply assigning officers to schools. Strong SRO programs are built on careful selection of the right officer, and training that SRO in well-defined roles and responsibilities. Strong

SRO Program:

school-based law enforcement programs involve a comprehensive agreement between the school and the law enforcement agency that fosters collaboration, communication, and ongoing evaluation.

The Case for High-Quality SRO Programs

In recent years, school-based law enforcement has come under heightened scrutiny. The result of this attention can serve to advance the way law enforcement interacts with students and school staff. News reports of some local officers misusing their power to search, restrain, or arrest youth inside schools have raised significant concerns for SRO programs nationwide. This is a serious matter because involvement in the juvenile justice system can negatively impact a child's life trajectory, hindering educational success and raising the risk of adult criminal behavior. Some studies have found associations between the presence of school-based law enforcement and increased student arrests and referrals to juvenile court for school discipline issues—often for public order offenses, such as willful defiance, disorderly conduct, disrupting the educational process, or disrupting a public school.

At the same time, a larger view of the trend data from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice reveals that over the past two decades, schools have been safer, juvenile arrests are down, and that this coincides with the expansion of SRO programs as part of a comprehensive strategy. Some studies and local evaluations indicate that SROs can have a positive impact, resulting in reduced suspensions, arrests for assaults and weapons charges, disciplinary actions, serious school violence, and crime in the areas surrounding schools.

Surveys of educators, students, officers, and community members suggest that school-based law enforcement programs are popular and perceived as effective. Respondents report that officers can do the following:

- Increase feelings of safety among students, teachers, and administrators
- Deter aggressive behavior, and empower staff to maintain order and address behavioral issues in a timely fashion
- Diminish classroom time spent on discipline and behavioral disruptions
- Improve school safety and reduce school-based crime
- Increase the likelihood that students report witnessing a crime, and help reduce community-wide criminality
- Improve relationships between law enforcement and youth

Existing data suggest that more rigorous research, such as randomized controlled trials, may be warranted to assess the true impact of school-based law enforcement broadly, and SROs in particular. Nevertheless, in communities that opt to use school-based law enforcement as part of their school safety strategy, the evidence to date suggests that properly selected,

trained, and governed SROs can achieve positive outcomes and avoid the pitfalls linked to some school-based law enforcement programs.

A Proactive, Collaborative Approach

Well-chosen and well-trained SROs focus on prevention and early intervention. This reflects a shift in the law enforcement's role from reactive (responding to problems as they occur) to proactive (identifying and altering the conditions that create school safety issues).

A common law enforcement approach to addressing school safety issues is the SARA Model:

- Scan the environment to identify patterns in recurrent issues of school safety
- Analyze the causes of these patterns to target areas amenable for intervention
- Respond with interventions to reduce the frequency or severity of these issues
- Assess the impact of interventions, and refine them as needed.

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Proactive school-based law enforcement relies on positive relationships between officers and students. These relationships build trust between SROs and the student body reduces school safety issues and promote perceptions of safety. Successful SRO programs require cross-sector connections among the school, law enforcement, mental health agencies, and other community-based partners. A cross-sector school safety team can help align



these groups and play an integral role in school-based emergency planning, improving access to resources, and integrating all responders, including law enforcement.

Through their positive relationships with students, SROs can glean knowledge of issues occurring in the community that can impact school safety, which gives them insight into campus threats, community problems, and safety concerns. As a member of the school safety team, SROs can interpret the policies and procedures of the law enforcement agency, share knowledge of community resources, clarify the connections between school and community crime, and help develop effective prevention strategies and interventions. In this way, SROs act as information liaisons, gathering and sharing knowledge across sectors.

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Governing Your SRO Program: MOUs and SOPs

Governance documents can be used to prevent confusion among SROs and school staff, decrease conflict between the agencies, while ensuring that the SRO program upholds the school’s educational philosophy.

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) define the school-law en-

forcement partnership and delineate the program mission and goals.

“One of the most frequent and destructive mistakes many SRO programs make is to fail to define the SROs’ roles and responsibilities in detail before—or even after—the officers take up their posts in the schools. When programs fail to do this, problems are often rampant at the beginning of the program—and often persist for months and even years.” —National Assessment of School Resource Officers.

MOUs are not one-size-fits-all; they should be created through a collaborative process that includes stakeholders from education, law enforcement, and the wider community. This process can establish a common vision that meets the unique needs, goals, and safety challenges of the school and its surrounding community. Moreover, MOUs should allow for adaptation to evolving needs and goals.

Key Components of MOUs:

- **Mission.** Defining the overarching purpose of the SRO program (e.g., to promote school safety and improve the educational environment).
- **Goals and objectives.** Outlining the purpose and expected outcomes of the program.
- **Roles and responsibilities.** Defining the SRO’s responsibilities within the larger context of the educational mission, and the SRO’s role related to teaching, crisis situations, and truancy. This includes clarification that the SRO’s role is NOT to be a school disciplinarian.
- **Level and type of commitment from partners.** Spelling out allocations of funding and resources (e.g., school office space and supplies).
- **Governance structure.** Outlining the leadership team, the chain of command, the decision-making process, the lines of communication across agencies, and SRO supervision and accountability.
- **Process for selecting SROs.** Outlining the process, including how school administrators will be involved.
- **Minimum training requirements for SROs.** Describing pre- and in-service training content and training funding sources.
- **Information exchange.** Explaining the process by which partners gather and share information.
- **Program and SRO evaluation.** Clarifying measures of success, evaluation, team composition and scope, and input from stakeholders.

- Student rights. Discussing students' rights related to a safe and positive school environment, police search and seizure, and use of force.
- Integrating the SRO. Outlining mechanisms for incorporating the SRO into the school environment and existing school-based prevention and promotion efforts (e.g., involvement in evidence-based prevention programs).
- Transparency and accountability. Clarifying the collection and public sharing of data related to SRO programming, including numbers of SROs and law enforcement interventions, and outlining plans to openly and appropriately share information about arrests, police use of force, and school-wide disciplinary actions by SROs with school staff and parents.



SROs can be valued members of the cross-agency school safety team, helping to promote a safe, supportive, and peaceful school environment. Creating an effective SRO program begins with a strong relationship between the school and law enforcement agency that defines the multifaceted role of the SRO as an educator, informal counselor, and law enforcement problem-solver. A clearly articulated description of SRO responsibilities recognizes that school discipline resides with school administrators, not the SRO.

Through positive relationships with students and collaboration with educators and mental health professionals, SROs can proactively address school safety issues and divert at-risk students from the juvenile justice system. Properly selected, trained, and governed SROs can achieve positive outcomes for students and the community by providing youth with the supports they need to succeed in school and in life.

Standard Operating Procedures

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) provide detailed guidance to SROs about daily operations, policies, and procedures. Some communities prefer to incorporate SOPs directly into their MOUs. Making SOPs available to the public can help to ensure that community members, school professionals, and administrators understand the SROs' role and duties, and what they are not, for example, school discipline.

“An SRO who observes a violation of the school code of conduct preserves a safe and orderly environment by making sure that a school administrator is aware of the violation so that school discipline can be determined solely by school officials.” — National Association of School Resource Officers.

Key Components of SOPs:

- School discipline versus legal processing: Delineates which offenses require a legal referral versus the use of traditional school discipline procedures.
- Chain of command: Delineates whom the officer reports to, how the administrator and officer collaborate to address incidents, and what the procedure is when there is a disagreement between the administrator and the SRO.
- Arresting students and use of force: Delineates when arrest or restraint of students or taking them into custody is appropriate, recognizing that these are actions of last resort to deal with offenses that cannot be handled through traditional school procedures.
- Communication and collaboration: Defines when the SRO will talk with school staff and law enforcement officials, including discussions about at-risk students and ongoing investigations.
- Uniform: Outlines SRO uniform requirements, a utility belt, and a service weapon, which can be a deterrent to criminal behavior.
- Searching and questioning students: Outlines when and how SROs can search and question students, and whether administrators and/or parents need to be alerted prior to the search.

Providing Multifaceted SRO Training

SROs must not only be well-chosen but also well-trained. Studies suggest that traditional police training often does not provide adequate instruction on topics relevant to school-based law enforcement, such as prevention and early intervention, diversion, adolescent and developmental psychology, and substance abuse. This lack of specialized training results in SROs who may be ill-equipped to fulfill key roles, jeopardizing the success of the SRO program and hindering school safety.

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