Do We Need Police to Keep Our School Safe?

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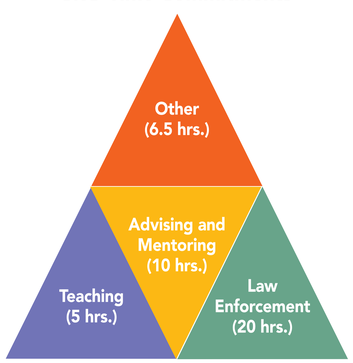
The Role of Police School Resource Officers (SROs) in Schools

- Career law enforcement officers with sworn authority are deployed in community-oriented policing.
- SROs work in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations (Girouard, 2001).
- SROs may teach a class or serve as an advisor.
- SROs work 20 hours per week on law enforcement, 10 hours on advising and mentoring, five hours on teaching, and six and a half hours on other activities (Finn & McDevitt, 2005).
- SROs create relationships with students and staff, while keeping schools safe by intervening in illegal behavior.

The Roles of SROs

SRO Time Commitments

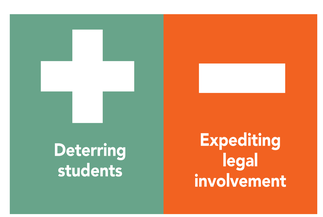


Issues

- SROs have a duty to handle any issues that would otherwise merit a call to the police.
- SROs may make arrests based on illegal activity, issue citations, take action against an unauthorized persons on campus, and respond to off-campus criminal activity that involves students.
- SROs can also help solve problems that are not crimes but may contribute to criminal behavior, such as bullying, (James & McCallion, 2013).
- The gray area in the discipline process contributes to a negative image of SROs that is often portrayed in the media. SROs can, for example, override administrators on matters of discipline.
- Conflict between police and minors is a strong predictor of future involvement with the criminal justice system. This would suggest that bringing SROs into school could be a slippery slope for at-risk kids. The Council of State Governments Justice Center (2014) reports that being expelled or suspended makes a student nearly three times more likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system within a year.
- Schools should be deterring students from the criminal justice system; instead, they are expediting the process by involving law enforcement in non-criminal matters.

Issues Arising with SROs

Tensions with SROs



Discussion

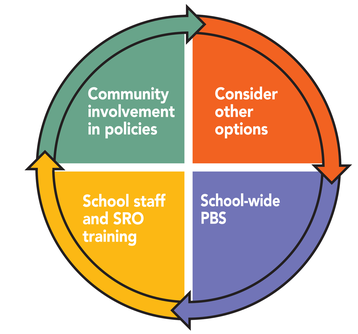
- In recent years, the concept of a school-to-prison pipeline has gained traction.
- Given the data on student suspension, expulsion, and contact with the justice system, it is hard to argue that schools are not playing a role.
- Sworn police officers, rather than administrators, are becoming involved in discipline practices, which can result in the student beginning a criminal record.
- It seems clear that many of these incidents are minor and do not merit such harsh consequences. In a study on SROs by the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, it is reported that when controlling for poverty, schools with an SRO have nearly five times the number of arrests for disorderly conduct.
- Five times the number of students are coming into contact with the justice system and being placed in the school-to-prison pipeline. While this may be an unintended consequence of having police in schools, it is significant and worth re-thinking.
- Minority students and students with disabilities are disproportionately involved in discipline issues.
- Many of the incidents could have been resolved without law enforcement intervention. Often, in these events, there has also been a lack of intervention and de-escalation training.

Points of Discussion

Recommendations

- It is important to consider alternatives before police officers are deployed in every school. SROs tend to function reactively, and there are strategies that can prevent or mitigate bad behavior before it becomes a problem.
- School-wide positive behavioral support is an empirically based strategy founded on the principles of applied behavior analysis to improve behavior in schools (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Effective schools adopt a school-wide intervention plan that reinforces the positive behavior of students.
- It is also important that staff are trained to conduct functional behavior assessments and create behavior intervention plans for students who require a higher level of behavior intervention.
- Police intervention should be reserved for issues related to illegal behavior. They should not be viewed as school disciplinarians by becoming involved in school issues that can be handled by the administration.
- Training for SROs also needs to be increased to meet the needs of all students, including minority students and students with disabilities. Policy-makers must be involved in creating these guidelines.
- In 2012, Denver, Colorado, passed a law that requires schools to adopt policies that limit law enforcement for minor behavior and increases training for the officers (Sneed, 2015). The policy is rich with training components that focus on de-escalation, differentiating between disciplinary and criminal issues, age-appropriate responding, cultural competence, and accommodations for students with disabilities (Poppen, 2013).
- Similarly, a group made up of government, education, and civil rights officials was created in Broward County, Florida, to create guidelines for the involvement of SROs in the discipline process (Sneed, 2015). The focus of SROs should be to become a respected member of the school community, who mentors and advises students.

Recommendations



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