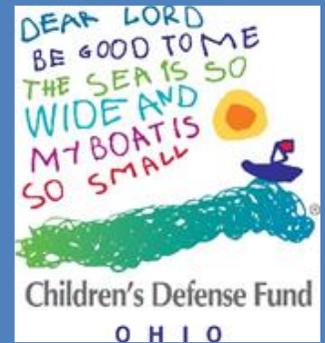


# School Resource Officers: Recommendations for Maximizing School Safety and Minimizing Risks to Ohio Children

August 30, 2018



## Keep Children at the Center of Student Safety Conversations

On Valentine's Day 2018, a gunman opened fire on his former classmates inside of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing seventeen students and staff members. As messages and images of the grieving families emerged and the nation mourned with the families of the victims, it was clear that the nation was mourning not only the loss of innocent life, but also a loss in the sense safety in our nation's schools.

In the weeks and months that followed the Parkland shooting, Ohio's students, parents, teachers, pundits and lawmakers engaged in a search for answers and strategies to help students and families feel safe and be safe at school. Media and events like the national and local "March for Our Lives" rallies and school walkouts organized by youth leaders placed the issue front and center and policymakers at every level began crafting solutions that included gun reform, expanded mental health services and an expanded presence of school resource officers in schools. While the full range of solutions was brought to the Ohio statehouse, the item to find consensus was the idea of expanding the presence of school resource officers throughout the state.

But while the idea of providing funding to expand the number of school resource officers ("SROs") resonated with the Ohio General Assembly, the state had no definition for SROs or guidelines for their roles inside of the state's schools. As Ohio State Rep. Sarah LaTourette explained, "You can't fund what you can't define." Rep. LaTourette and State Rep. John Patterson went back to work on a bill that would ultimately become law and define SROs and their relationships with Ohio's schools.

While law enforcement partnerships and other upgrades in safety and security measures and equipment can play a necessary role in school safety, they must be carefully balanced. Fear may encourage school boards and law makers to flood the state's schools with law enforcement officers, tactical weapons and barricade equipment, but the research explains how harmful these actions can be to overall student health and well-being. The challenge is not merely to keep



student safe from active shooters. Schools must also foster healthy learning, identification of mental or behavioral needs and connections with appropriate services for student and school safety.

This issue brief is directed at Ohio school districts that have school resource officers (SROs) or are considering them. It seeks to provide guidance about how they can be used most effectively, often together with other strategies to improve school climate. This brief also cautions that adding SROs, if special steps are not taken, can contribute to a negative school climate and to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline®. If used as disciplinarians, SROs can set children on a path to school failure and early, unnecessary contact with juvenile and criminal justice systems. For communities that will decide (or have decided) to include SROs in their school safety plans, this brief provides information about model practices and policies that can minimize the risks too often inherent in school-based policing and help school-based police officers contribute to a positive, productive learning environment where student success is supported.

## **Ohio's School Resource Officer Law: House Bill 318**

HB 318, which was signed into law in July 2018, defines an SRO as a peace officer appointed through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between a law enforcement agency and a school district to provide a distinct set of services defined in law. SROs must complete a basic peace officer training program approved by the Ohio Peace Officer Training Commission. New SROs must also complete 40 hours of specialized training through the state or national school resource officers associations—SROs appointed prior to the bill's effective date are exempt from this requirement. Specialized training must include instruction on skills, tactics and strategies regarding the nature of school campuses; school building security needs and characteristics; communication techniques to enhance interactions between students and SROs; the mechanics of positive role modeling for youth; classroom management; Ohio attendance/truancy laws; and youth drug use. In addition, officers must receive instruction on the nuance of law enforcement function within school environments including:

- Psychological and physiological characteristics of students by age
- The appropriate role of school resource officers in school discipline
- Role of SROs in reducing the number of referrals to juvenile court
- Developmentally appropriate de-escalation, interviews, interrogations and behavior management strategies.

SROs may carry out any responsibilities outlined in their contractual agreement, however, the law vests school districts and administrators with the final decision-making authority for school disciplinary matters.

The new law also requires that school districts seeking to obtain or retain SROs must do so by entering into a memorandum of understanding (“MOU”) with the appropriate law enforcement agency. The MOU must define the purpose of the SRO program; required or suggested law enforcement expertise, including an understanding of child and adolescent development; professional development and training requirements; requirements for coordinated crisis planning; roles and expectations of the parties; and protocols and distinctions for handling suspected criminal activity compared to the handling of school disciplinary matters.<sup>1</sup>

## School Resource Officers in Ohio and Nationwide

According to the Ohio School Resource Officers Association, School Resource Officers are trained to fulfill three roles: (1) keeping the peace in schools; (2) mentoring and guidance for students, parents and administrators; and (3) sharing law-related expertise in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of SROs also point out that they can provide an extra safety net in schools, assist with boundaries and expectations for students, parents and teachers and serve as positive role models.<sup>3</sup>

The number of schools with SROs has grown dramatically over the last several decades going from just 1 percent in 1975 to about 30 percent in 2013.<sup>4</sup> 70 percent of Ohio districts have SROs, with about 650 SROs belonging to the state association and another 90 holding membership in the national organization.<sup>5</sup> In fact, nationally, according to the 2017 Indicators of Crime and School Safety Report, the presence of security personnel has increased at both the primary and secondary school levels significantly over the past decade.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While not the subject of this issue brief, the legislation also creates limits out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for preschool through third grade students and requires school districts to implement a positive behavior intervention and supports framework.

<sup>2</sup> *What School Resource Officers (SROs) Are*, OHIO SCH. RESOURCE OFFICERS ASS’N, available at <http://osroa.org/general-information/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Saul et. al, *School Officer: A Job With Many Roles and One Big Responsibility*, New York Times (Mar. 4, 2018), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/us/school-resource-officers-shooting.html>

Bureau of Justice Statistics, LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENTS 1997, 2000, 2003 AND 2007, using the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey, available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=71>; see Amanda Petteruti, *Education Under Arrest: The Case Against Police In Schools*, JUST. POL’Y INST. 1, 1 (2011), available at [http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarrest\\_fullreport.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarrest_fullreport.pdf) (citing U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics).

<sup>5</sup> Will Garbe, *Ohio bill requires 40 hours of training for officers in schools*, DAYTON DAILY NEWS, Feb. 27, 2018, available at <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/ohio-bill-requires-hours-training-for-officers-schools/626QLgePI2P5hq2rP9sFxK/>.

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Education Sciences. Indicators of School Crime and Safety. 2017. Available at, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018036.pdf>

## The Importance of Positive School Climate in Preserving School Safety and Supporting Student Success

Despite the horrific nature of school shootings, data show that children are safer in school than in almost any other place.<sup>7</sup> The absolute best way to promote and preserve school safety is for community stakeholders, parents, students and school staff to work together to build a positive school climate that minimizes police intervention<sup>8</sup> and emphasizes positive, preventive approaches to school discipline, reserving suspension and expulsion for only the most serious offenses that endanger students or staff.

Children learn best when they attend and remain in school. They thrive in environments that foster respect and in which adults develop strong relationships with students and take an active role in teaching and modeling appropriate conflict resolution strategies, practices that prevent bullying and other positive social skills.<sup>9</sup> Thus, any consideration of reforms related to school safety must be based on research and data that show what works most effectively with children and youth. A school with police officers who are not trained in child development and who have no or limited experience with or knowledge about how to interact positively with young people works against the goal of engaging students for academic and personal success.

Research shows that a positive school climate helps to promote academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, healthy student development, and teacher retention.<sup>10</sup> School climate refers to both school life (for example, safety, relationships, teaching and learning) and larger organizational patterns (for example, fragmented or cohesive, healthy or unhealthy, conscious or unrecognized).<sup>11</sup> Introducing police officers into the school environment affects school climate and its impact can be profoundly negative, especially if executed without careful thought, planning, and a clear understanding of the limitations and expectations at the outset. To this end, the recommendations set forth by the National Association of School Psychologists serve as a useful set of comprehensive approaches for all communities to consider when discussing school safety and the addition of SROs.<sup>12</sup> Communication among stakeholders that emphasizes well-integrated programs that are balanced, effective and well-monitored is key.<sup>13</sup> SROs, if present, must be part of that integrated, positive approach.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nicole White & Janet Lauritsen, *Violent Crime Against Youth, 1994-2010*, U.S. DEP'T OF JUST. BUREAU OF JUST. STAT, (2012), available at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/vcay9410.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Dignity in Schools Campaign, *Fact Sheet: Creating Positive School Climate and Discipline*, available at [http://www.nesri.org/sites/default/files/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Positive\\_Discipline.pdf](http://www.nesri.org/sites/default/files/Fact_Sheet_Positive_Discipline.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> See *id.* at 18–57.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Cohen et. al., *School Climate: Research, Policy, Practice and Teacher Education*, 111 TCHRS.C. REC. 1, 180–213 (2009).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> Cowan, K. C., Vaillancourt, K., Rossen, E., & Pollitt, K. (2013). A framework for safe and successful schools [Brief]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. available at <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/FrameworkforSafeandSuccessfulSchoolEnvironments.PDF>

<sup>13</sup> Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, *A Call for More Effective Prevention of Violence: December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement* CURRY SCH. OF EDUC. (2012), available at

## Unintended Consequences: How SROs Can Exacerbate the Cradle to Prison Pipeline

The term Cradle to Prison Pipeline<sup>®</sup> refers to the criminalization of children, especially children of color and low income children, at increasingly young ages.<sup>14</sup> A Black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy has a one in six chance.<sup>15</sup> Many of the policies and practices that lead to these startling outcomes happen in our schools. The use of zero tolerance policies in student discipline and the use of police officers to patrol schools, ostensibly to ensure student safety, have exacerbated the Cradle to Prison Pipeline<sup>®</sup> in Ohio, especially amongst Black and Latino children.<sup>16</sup> In the 2016-2017 school year, statewide discipline data from the Ohio Department of Education show a disproportionate number of Black and Latino students facing suspension and expulsion when compared with their white peers. In fact, Black students are suspended at greater than six times the rate of their White peers and Latino students are suspended at twice the rate.

### Numbers to Know

6.1	Factor by which Black students are more likely to be suspended than White students.
7.4	Factors by which emotionally disturbed students are more likely to be suspended than students without disabilities.
6.4	Factors by which economically disadvantaged students are more likely to be suspended than financially stable students.

Schools that frequently remove children from school for disciplinary reasons are also likely to show increased numbers of arrests of students in school. The presence of police officers in school buildings often exacerbates that problem.

---

<http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting> (endorsed by 183 organizations and over 200 prevention scholars and practitioners).

<sup>14</sup> *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline*, CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND 1, 15–16 (2007), available at

<http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/cradle-prison-pipeline-report-2007-full-highres.html#updates>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Children's Defense Fund-Ohio, *School Discipline Policies and the Cradle to Prison Pipeline*<sup>®</sup> (2017), available at <https://www.childrensdefense.org/cdfoh/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/07/school-discipline-policies-issue-brief-MAY2017.pdf>; see also Children's Defense Fund-Ohio, *Zero Tolerance and Exclusionary School Discipline Policies Harm Students and Contribute to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline*<sup>®</sup>, 1, 7 (2012), available at <http://www.cdfohio.org/assets/pdf-files/issue-brief-zero-tolerance.pdf>; *The Facts About Dangers of Added Police In Schools*, THE SENT'G PROJECT 1,1 (2013), available at [http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/The-Facts-About-Dangers-of-Added-Police-in-Schools\\_The-Sentencing-Project.pdf](http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/The-Facts-About-Dangers-of-Added-Police-in-Schools_The-Sentencing-Project.pdf) (Adopting zero tolerance policies and adding police officers in schools leads to “unnecessary involvement in the justice system for youth”).



Nationally, thousands of students are arrested or given criminal citations at schools each year—70,000 nationally in the 2013-14 school year.<sup>17</sup>

Police officers are often brought into schools for the purpose of improving students' and educators' sense of security, but when schools fail to establish clear boundaries separating serious offenses requiring police intervention from school discipline issues that should be handled by educators and specially trained school staff, officers can

overstep their role.<sup>18</sup> Although there is no single national set of data setting out every arrest by SROs or police officers in the nation's schools, multiple data sets show that as the presence of law enforcement officers in schools has increased over the past decade, arrests and referrals to the juvenile justice system have also increased.<sup>19</sup>

For example, after the school shooting incident at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, Denver Public Schools increased the presence of SROs. Just four years later the number of student referrals to the court system increased by 70 percent with 42 percent of the referrals for minor issues like offensive language or "disruptive appearance."<sup>20</sup> To mitigate this unintended consequence, Denver took a number of steps to limit the roles of SROs and implemented training requirements, cutting the number of law enforcement referrals from nearly 1,400 in the 2003-04 school year to just over 500 in 2011-12 even with a 12 percent increase in enrollment.<sup>21</sup>

School-based arrests of children for disorderly conduct and other non-violent offenses simply should not happen. But they are happening in Ohio. Toledo Public Schools has the state's highest rate of suspensions in the state with a disproportionate number of Black students subjected to this type of discipline. Further, in the 2016–2017 school year, approximately 309 students were arrested under Toledo's Safe School Ordinance,<sup>22</sup> which allows for students to be arrested and charged for disruptive behavior in school. Of those students, 49 cases were adjudicated. In 28 of those adjudicated cases (57 percent) Black youth were charged.<sup>23</sup> Schools must implement more effective and appropriate

---

<sup>17</sup> Education Week, *Which Students Are Arrested the Most?* (2017), accessed at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/2017/policing-america-schools/student-arrests.html#/overview>;

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Police in Schools are Not the Answer to the Newtown Shootings*, ADVANCEMENT PROJECT 1, 4-5 (2013), available at <http://www.advancementproject.org/resources/entry/police-in-schools-are-not-the-answer-to-the-newtown-shooting>

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Toledo, Ohio Safe School Ordinance, Toledo Municipal Code § 537.16 and Editorial, *TPS must tackle the suspension rate* (April 19, 2018). Toledo Blade available at <http://www.toledoblade.com/Editorials/2018/04/19/Toledo-Public-Schools-TPS-must-tackle-the-suspension-rate.html>

<sup>23</sup> Lucas County Juvenile Court, 2017 Annual Report. available at, <https://www.co.lucas.oh.us/DocumentCenter/View/70268/Lucas-County-Annual-Report---2017>

responses to prevent and address student behavior in a way that avoids arrest and is not racially disproportionate. School safety and a positive school climate, are critical for students to learn, grow and develop and should be priorities for school administrators, parents, students and the community as a whole. Unnecessary student arrests do not serve that purpose.

There is ample evidence that SROs can create, rather than prevent, a fearful environment in schools.<sup>24</sup> Many children, especially children of color, have had powerfully negative interactions with the police in their neighborhoods, which makes the presence of police officers in schools, for the stated purpose of student comfort and safety, particularly unsettling. This is exacerbated by the fact that youth of color are more likely to attend schools that are patrolled by SROs.<sup>25</sup> Fearful environments in schools fail to help children learn how to develop meaningful relationships with adults in the school environment, a missed opportunity for students in need of positive relationships. It also is true that school climates that project an expectation that students will behave poorly become self-fulfilling prophecies: students have less reason to respect each other or adults in the school when the expectation is that they will misbehave.<sup>26</sup>

These facts further reinforce the need for caution when considering adding SROs to school buildings. Communities must discuss how the use of overly harsh student discipline and the presence of police officers in schools have exacerbated

the Cradle to Prison Pipeline® in Ohio and should discuss whether adding SROs to their buildings will be counterproductive to their overall goal of improving school safety by fostering a negative school climate. In too many cases, the primary impact of



SROs in schools has been to push more young people out of school. Communities that consider adding SROs, therefore, should also engage in discussions about reducing exclusionary discipline practices like suspension and expulsion and

---

<sup>24</sup> Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, *A Call for More Effective Prevention of Violence: December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement* CURRY SCH. OF EDUC. (2012), available at <http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting> (endorsed by 183 organizations and over 200 prevention scholars and practitioners).

<sup>25</sup> Amanda Petteruti, *Education Under Arrest: The Case Against Police In Schools*, JUST. POL'Y INST. 1, 1 (2011), available at [http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarrest\\_fullreport.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/educationunderarrest_fullreport.pdf) (citing U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics).

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Simmons-Morton, et. al., *Student-School Bonding and Adolescent Problem Behavior*, 14 HEALTH EDUC. RESEARCH 1, 99–107 (1999); Megan Marshall, *Examining School Climate: Defining Factors and Educational Influences*, GEORGIA STATE UNIV. CENTER. FOR SCH. SAFETY, SCH. CLIMATE AND CLASSROOM MGMT. (2004), available at [http://education.gsu.edu/SchoolSafety/download%20files/whitepaper\\_marshall.pdf](http://education.gsu.edu/SchoolSafety/download%20files/whitepaper_marshall.pdf).

eliminating, to the extent permitted by law,<sup>27</sup> zero tolerance policies in their schools. Only if SROs are part of a larger strategy to build a positive school climate and reduce the push out of students from school will the effort be more likely to result in a net positive for all children.

## Supporting Promising Practices

Schools that create positive school climates by implementing positive, preventive approaches to discipline<sup>28</sup> and fostering respectful relationships between adults and students rarely have a need for police intervention into incidents on their campuses.<sup>29</sup> However, if SROs are being used in a school or school district, there are particular strategies school districts and communities should implement to maximize their potential impact on positive school culture. To be successful, stakeholders must be engaged early in the process with input from and communication with parents, students, teachers, school staff and representatives from the juvenile justice system and child advocacy community. The written memorandum of understanding between the school district and police department should limit SRO intervention to scenarios where it's absolutely necessary. Successful SRO programs typically include robust community engagement and participation in the process. *Strategies for Youth*, a national organization committed to fostering positive student and police relations, published a parent's checklist to guide discussions with their local school leaders about SROs and implementation of SRO programs in their school buildings.<sup>30</sup>

## Recommendations

The best practice for most schools, based on data about school discipline and arrest rates in schools in which SROs are placed, is **to not introduce SROs into the school environment**. Instead, resources and efforts should focus on building a positive school climate, implementing preventive and positive approaches to discipline and building a culture of respect and communication between students, school staff and parents and schools can enter into partnerships with law enforcement officials to respond rapidly in the rare instance that an emergency situation occurs.

If communities choose to introduce or have already chosen to introduce SROs into their schools, it is important that significant and deliberate efforts be made to incorporate the SROs into the school climate in a positive way. The three

---

<sup>27</sup> Children's Defense Fund Issue Brief, *Zero Tolerance and Exclusionary School Discipline Policies Harm Students and Contribute to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline*, available at <https://www.childrensdefense.org/cdfoh/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/07/school-discipline-policies-issue-brief-MAY2017.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Johanna Wald & Lisa Thureau, *Taking School Safety Too Far?: The Ill-Defined Role Police Play in Schools*, EDUC. WK., Feb. 22, 2010, available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/02/24/22wald.h29.html?tkn=UMPFYKxBS5qhfDNuWUX98T7cQIGVJQIfEw6K&cm> (explaining how the presence of police officers in schools in most school districts results in more arrests of students because educators and school police officers do not work out or articulate their separate roles).

<sup>29</sup> See Dignity in Schools Campaign, *supra* note 8

<sup>30</sup> Strategies for Youth. Parents Checklist for SROs in Your Schools. (June 2018), Available at, <https://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ParentGuide-SROs-InSchool-062518-EN.pdf>

recommendations below will help ensure that SROs are a positive part of school culture and do not contribute to school pushout and the Cradle to Prison Pipeline® crisis.

### 1. Define SRO roles and responsibilities through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

Ohio law now requires an MOU that clearly sets out the duties and boundaries SROs will follow in a particular school.<sup>31</sup>

Such a document helps “to ensure that law enforcement, school officials and the communities they serve have a shared

The MOU should include language requiring collection and reporting of the following types of data:

- Number of incidents resulting in a juvenile arrest for conduct on school grounds or at a school-sponsored event, disaggregated;
- Number of incidents resulting in other forms of law enforcement intervention—including searches and seizures; questioning; issuance of a criminal citation, ticket, or summons; filing of a delinquency petition; and referral to a probation officer—for juvenile conduct on school grounds or at a school sponsored event, disaggregated by type and demographics;
- Number of suspensions or other disciplinary consequences imposed on students, broken down by school; offense/infraction; student’s demographics; and disciplinary consequence imposed;
- Regulations, policies and protocols governing the SRO program;
- Budget information for the SRO program;
- Number of SROs deployed to each school;
- Training materials for SROs; and
- Number and types of complaints lodged against SROs.<sup>1</sup>

understanding of the goals of the SRO program and that these officers receive the necessary support and training prior to their deployment.”<sup>32</sup> Community participation is critical in developing an MOU will ensure that all parties, including teachers, parents and students, buy into the rules and responsibilities spelled out in the document and agree to monitor its implementation.

Ohio’s School Resource Officer Association provides a model MOU, which has been reviewed by stakeholder groups and provide a starting point for school district administrators interested in pursuing SRO programs within their schools.<sup>33</sup>

***An effective MOU makes clear the roles and responsibilities of SROs***

The MOU should distinguish disciplinary infractions, which are handled by school administrators, and other behavior that merits law enforcement intervention. Further, some systems require SROs to use alternatives to law enforcement actions to limit juvenile justice referrals.

<sup>31</sup>Ohio Revised Code §3313.951

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Y. Kim & I. India Geronimo, *Policing in Schools: Developing a Governance Document for School Resource Officers in K-12 Schools*, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION 1, 6 (2009), available at [http://www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/racialjustice/whitepaper\\_policinginschools.pdf](http://www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/racialjustice/whitepaper_policinginschools.pdf) and Peter Finn, et al., *Comparison of Program Activities and Lessons Learned Among 19 School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs*, NATIONAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFERENCE SERVICE 1, 23–34 (2005), available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209272.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Ohio School Resource Officer Association, *State of Ohio Sample Memorandum of Understanding*. available at, <http://osroa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/OSROAs-Sample-MOU.pdf>

***An effective MOU establishes a data collection and reporting system to monitor the activities of SRO.***

MOUs must provide for clear communication and transparency regarding what SROs are doing and constant evaluation of how things are working. It is recommended that the MOU require SROs to report on their activities.<sup>34</sup> Without an accurate report, the school, the police and the public cannot assess the programs properly.<sup>35</sup>

***An effective MOU must include a grievance procedure for parents, students and school staff to submit complaints about the activities of SROs.***

The MOU should include details such as the right of parents to submit complaints in their native language. Additionally, complaints should be investigated and resolved quickly, for example, within 30 days and allow for consequences for SROs found to have committed abuse or misconduct, such as additional training or suspension from duty.<sup>36</sup>

***An effective MOU must specify minimum selection requirements for SROs.***

MOUs should set forth specific criteria for selecting individuals to serve as SROs. Qualities that make sense in this context include commitment to working with children and having positive rapport with children, communicating well, having the ability to teach or the willingness to learn how to teach and the flexibility to work with school administrators. While SROs should be experienced officers, they should not be chosen based on seniority alone.<sup>37</sup> Children need and deserve to be served by well-trained, well-prepared officers who choose to work in schools because they genuinely care about children and want to ensure their safety and academic and personal success.

***An effective MOU must set forth training requirements for SROs.***

In addition to the 40 hours of training now required by Ohio law, MOUs should establish minimum training requirements for annual in-service training on child and adolescent development and psychology, positive behavior interventions and supports, conflict resolution, restorative practices, disabilities and mental health and cultural competency.<sup>38</sup>

**Best Practice: An MOU should include the following:**

**Differentiate** between disciplinary misconduct, which is to be handled by the school and criminal offenses, which should be handled by the SRO or other law enforcement;

**Understand and respect** the rights of the children;

**Be transparent and accountable;**

**Define** the role of the SRO, also keeping in mind the educational mission of the school;

**Provide** for minimum and recommended training requirements;

**Promote** non-punitive approaches to student behavior;<sup>1</sup> and

**Specify** that arrest may only be used as a last resort.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 32.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Finn, et al., *Comparison of Program Activities and Lessons Learned Among 19 School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs*, NATIONAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFERENCE SERVICE 1, 23–34 (2005), available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209272.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 27.

To support and encourage application of this training, the MOU should also include a clear statement promoting non-punitive approaches to student behavior and a positive school climate.



## **2. SROs Must Receive Extensive and On-Going Training**

Although the above cites the 40 hours of specialized training required by law and the need to include SRO training in the MOU between the school district and the police department, the need for on-going training is significant enough to warrant its own separate recommendation as well. Police officers are typically trained to deal with adult perpetrators on the street, not children in school. Because SROs engage in different jobs from a typical patrol officer, it is important for SROs to be properly trained to work in the school setting and to adjust their tactics to this specialized environment. A crucial feature of training for SROs is it must be on-going with experts suggesting a 10 hours annual minimum training.<sup>39</sup> Training topics must also include, in addition to the basic course, information about child development, adolescent psychology, cultural competence and other information specific to children and the school environment.

## **3. The Roles of the SRO Must Be Clearly Defined and Support the Creation of a Positive School Climate With Ongoing School and Community Engagement and Oversight**

Schools need to establish how much time SROs should spend in each of their roles (i.e., law enforcement, counselor, teacher). It is important that schools establish a good balance between all roles. This is something that is unique to each school district and to each building within a district, of course. How those roles and officers' time is divided depends largely on the needs of each community, but discussion of the balancing of officers' time and focus should be focused at all times on fostering a positive school climate. SROs can and should play a role in helping to educate students and staff about restorative practices, conflict resolution programs, peer mediation, teen courts and other ways to involve students in reflecting on behavior and how student behavior should be taught, managed and modeled in schools.

## **Conclusion**

Every child deserves a school that is warm, welcoming and filled with learning. In an effort to ensure that schools are safe places for children to learn and teachers to teach, we cannot sacrifice those things we know to be good for children and their development. Without special training and attention, SROs should not be included in school or district safety plans because they pose a greater threat to the positive development of students than they offer in real or perceived

---

<sup>39</sup> Kim & Geronimo, *supra* note 32.

safety. Efforts must be made to maximize the value of additional adults in the school building committed to the well-being of children.

For most children, schools remain among the safest places to be; school shootings are still a very rare (albeit far too frequent) occurrence and are unlikely to affect most Ohio children. There are definite risks to young people when police officers are brought into school environments, although the right training and clear differentiation between law enforcement duties and school administrators' and educators' discipline and classroom management responsibilities can minimize those risks.

Placement of SROs entails additional costs both in school staff time and resources, however this issue brief does not address those considerations. Moreover, the decision to include police officers at a school must also be weighed against other school-based efforts to build a positive school climate supportive of student learning.

School safety decisions involve all stakeholders in a school community, particularly parents and students. This brief is intended to provide an introduction to the issues communities should consider in deciding whether to bring SROs into their schools and recommendations for how to do so responsibly, with a focus on what will help Ohio children succeed.

## Mission Statement

The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind mission is to ensure every child a Healthy State, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by individual donations, foundations, corporate and government grants. The CDF-Ohio office was established in 1981.

## Staff

**Tracy Nájera, MPA, PhD**

Executive Director

**Pam Kreber**

Associate Director for  
Operations &  
Fundraising

**Ashon McKenzie, Esq.**

Policy Director

**Nicole Thomas, PhD**

Project Manager, Data  
& Research

**Jessica Haywood**

Project Coordinator

Columbus

395 East Broad Street, Suite 330, Columbus, OH 43215

(614) 221.2244

[www.cdfohio.org](http://www.cdfohio.org)

National Office

25 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001

(202) 662.3510

[www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)