

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF:

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Issue at a Glance

Learning is most effective when schools are safe and welcoming environments for all students and adults. Principals know that their first responsibility is to foster a safe culture and climate for students, school staff, parents, and school community members. Principals also know that School Resource Officers (SROs) can play an integral role in ensuring a sense of safety, providing physical safety within a school building, and the development of school infrastructure. The best SROs play an important role in welcoming, counseling, and mentoring students to collaborate with school leaders and administrators to ensure safety is of the highest priority.

The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) requirements emphasize a triad approach (mentor, teacher, law enforcer) and require officers to complete NASRO's 40-hour Basic SRO course, often supplemented by advanced training, significant law enforcement experience (typically three or more years), and a focus on positive youth engagement, avoiding involvement in routine school discipline, and a clean record, all guided by Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and agreement of SROs between police and schools.

After tragic school shootings in recent years, the discussion around the presence of SROs and other law enforcement personnel in schools has emerged as a prominent national policy issue. It is important to note that there is a distinction between a police officer or security guard hired to work in a school and an SRO, who is selected, specially trained, and assigned to protect and serve the school environment.

SROs contribute to the safe-schools and planning team by ensuring a safe and secure campus, educating students about law-related topics, and mentoring students as informal advisers and role models. The most effective SROs maintain open-door policies, engage in mentoring and training sessions, and refer students or educators to social services, legal aid, community services, and public health agencies.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2023–24:

- 48% of U.S. public schools had a School Resource Officer (SRO) present at least once a week.
- 92% of those officers routinely carried firearms; and
- 60% wore body cameras, an increase in body camera usage from the previous year.

In addition, the May 2025 NCES School Pulse Survey on School Crime, Preparedness, and Safety Procedures, which provides data from 2024–25 reported a 5% increase of SROs in schools. It also found that:

- 53% of public schools reported having sworn law enforcement officers present at their school at least once a week.
- 96% of public schools reported providing safety training to classroom teachers or aides.
- 40% of public schools reported that lack of or inadequate alternative placement or programs for disruptive students limit in a major way efforts to reduce or prevent disruptive behavioral issues from occurring on school grounds.

With the increased presence of law enforcement personnel in schools, there is also discussion about their impact on school climate, discipline, and the school-to-prison pipeline, especially with respect to disproportionate enforcement toward students of color.

A 2024 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported similar trends for the 2017–18 school year. Compared to white boys, Black boys were two times as likely to be arrested. Marginally, Latino boys were more likely than Latino girls to be arrested. The report also found that students' race and ethnicity, gender, and disability status were all prominent characteristics when it came to rates of arrest and referrals to police. Specifically, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students; boys; and students with disabilities had the highest arrest rates. When students belonged to more than one of these groups, they experienced even higher rates.

Numerous media reports in recent years have also highlighted the use of excessive force and exclusionary discipline for minor infractions by some law enforcement officials in schools. These incidents are the reason why SROs need to be properly vetted and trained to work in a school setting. While the primary responsibility is safety, regular duties can include service as a teacher of law-related topics such as bullying, gang violence, driving safety, underage drinking, and more.

National Principals Association Position

- Specially trained SROs play an important role in K–12 schools and can serve as educators, mentors, and support figures for students while maintaining the physical security of the building, playing a vital role in ensuring that schools are safe and welcoming places where all students can learn.
- Principals, in cooperation with SROs, should establish relationships with essential stakeholders in the community to provide first-response teams to ensure the safety of everyone in the school.
- School districts must have clear and concise MOUs with law enforcement agencies that define the role of SRO to include law enforcement officer, teacher, and informal adviser. MOUs must also specify that school discipline situations are the responsibility of school administrators and not the SRO.
- The establishment of trusting relationships in school is the most effective means of ensuring school safety.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Oppose the federal proposal, the Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act (CCRA), which would allow individuals with concealed carry firearm permit holders to carry in school zones.
- Urge the state departments of education, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice to disclose limitations of arrest data and collect arrest and referral data, by race, for students with disabilities who receive services under Section 504.
- Clearly inform school districts about future changes to arrest and referral data in civil rights data collection.
- Assist districts and schools by increasing funding for the recruiting, hiring, and training of SROs, recognizing that they are an integral component to a safe school environment.
- Enact policies requiring all law enforcement officials who work in schools to undergo extensive training that adequately equips them to work in a school setting and specifically with children, adolescents, and those with special needs.
- Adequately fund and support evidence-based SRO training programs and ensure that all current and aspiring SROs have access to them. Training for SROs should be an ongoing process, with ample opportunities for professional development and continued learning.
- Remove barriers between education and local health service agencies and encourage local communities to focus on schools as the hub for the delivery of mental and physical health and social services.
- Oppose policies that would allow administrators, teachers, or anyone other than specially trained SROs to carry firearms in school.
- Create policies which support SRO school safety training of all administrators and staff.
- Increase federal Project Serv appropriations to fund schools which have been impacted by a shooting.
- Give states and local communities the ability to combine federal and state funding from separate agencies to address mental health and school safety issues at the local level.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Develop responsive systems to support school safety in partnership with all stakeholders, SROs, and local law enforcement.
- Utilize a uniform code of conduct that contains clear policies regarding bullying and harassment and meets all federal, state, and board requirements pertaining to investigations, recording, and reporting.
- Ensure that SROs are professionally trained to work in a school setting, with students, and with children with special needs. Security officials who are not active-duty law enforcement officers and law enforcement officers who have not completed adequate training to work in school settings are not acceptable substitutes for specially trained SROs.
- Implement minimum training requirements for SROs and ensure that the training includes the proactive and responsive systems delineated above and adequately prepares them to work specifically with children, adolescents, and students with special needs to ensure a safe, orderly, and inviting school environment.

- Implement effective SRO training programs which include school and personal liability issues, mediation and conflict resolution including de-escalation techniques, disaster and emergency response, and student behavioral dynamics.
- Ensure that specially trained SROs are the only individuals who are permitted to carry or access firearms on school grounds.
- Ensure that principals are directly involved in the interview, hiring, and ongoing professional evaluation process for SROs and have the opportunity for meaningful input about candidates for open positions to ensure that they are a good fit for the school's culture and climate.
- Maintain ongoing training and development for all staff, including SROs, regarding school safety, bullying, vaping/tobacco use, and related mental health issues.
- Provide training to school leaders that outlines their discipline management responsibility versus the law enforcement responsibilities of an SRO as well as the legal boundaries for SRO action and investigation in schools.
- Use emergency preparedness plans that follow the National Incident Management System for Schools developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Safe Schools Program.
- Work with school leaders and their SROs to establish curricula for grades K–12 that address violence prevention and bullying, including electronic aggression.
- Collaborate with school leaders, parents, SROs, other local law enforcement agencies, public and private social service agencies, and other agencies to develop programs and services to foster caring schools and communities.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Develop an MOU with local law enforcement that clearly states that discipline issues are the responsibility of school administrators and not the SRO.
- Ensure the MOU defines the role of SRO to include the law enforcement officer, teacher, and informal adviser.
- Develop proactive systems to address school safety that include all stakeholders, including SROs. This includes creating a personalized, safe, orderly, and inviting school environment predicated on nurturing relationships and shared responsibility.
- Ensure that physical restraint and seclusion tactics are avoided to the greatest extent possible by SROs and all school staff.
- Complete the Introduction to the Incident Command System for Schools (IS-100.SCa for Schools) course, which was designed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, available through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Emergency Management Institute.
- Regularly administer a schoolwide culture survey of students, parents, and school personnel, including SROs. The climate survey should measure the degree to which the well-being and safety of everyone in the learning community is intentionally fostered and nurtured, including relationships, collaborative

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leadership, ethics, equity, wellness, and communication—factors which contribute to a supportive environment.

- Collaborate with parents, SROs, other local law enforcement agencies, public and private social service agencies, and other agencies to develop programs and services to foster caring schools and communities.
- Partner with all stakeholders, including the news media, to ensure transparency and responsible dissemination of information regarding school safety and the role of the SRO in the building.