

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**School Resource Officers:  
Bridging the Gaps in Communities**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

School Resource Officers (SROs) should be placed on each campus starting with the elementary schools in all communities. The SRO can start crafting the future for that young child on how they view a police officer. Relationships between students and officers are built on trust and respect, so that students know the SRO is there to help them. With the violent world that we live in, the goal is to protect our schools, which means that cities across the nation have started putting officers inside schools. The SROs are working on creating positive relationships, and showing that if stakeholders work as a team, it's a win-win for students, school staff, and community members.

Over the past few years, schools, communities, and other stakeholders have studied the effectiveness of creating safer schools by arming campuses with SROs and creating a first line of defense. There will always be evil in this world despite how prepared communities are. Implementing a SRO program has the potential to lead negative effects of more students being introduced to the criminal justice system if implemented incorrectly. Parents can begin to view the school as unsafe, and worry about the need to have a uniformed, weapon carrying officer on campus. However, if the SRO can be a part of a team to change the culture and beliefs of a school district and community, then the investment is worth the chance. School districts and cities should work together to provide a comprehensive SRO program to bridge the gap between the youth, families and citizens in the community.

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## INTRODUCTION

As times have changed over the last decade, so has the responsibility and requirements of quality policing. Issues that are dealt with daily by police were only occasional calls or isolated occurrences a few years ago. One major area of change is the idea of having police presence in elementary and secondary school campuses around the nation. School Resource Officers (SROs) have become the norm in many communities, regardless of demographics. Community leaders and school board members are constantly on the look-out for new and effective ways to keep students and teachers safe and prevent future school violence. While there is not a single action that police can take to prevent school violence, SROs on all campuses, is one way to deter would be violence from occurring.

The relationship SROs form while being on campus includes students, the community, and families. These relationships help create a school environment where learning can be the top priority and students feel safe. When a school's performance is raised, this is an added benefit to the city as a means of population growth. School districts should work with local municipalities to employ and train the most qualified SRO in order to foster a positive relationship with students, and community members. However, as expected, implementing SROs across school districts does not come without debate and concern.

Citizens and community stakeholders want what is best for the youth in the community but with new programs, and change come concerns and questions. Community members will need information about what an SRO is, and what their duties include. Citizens will want reassurance that these SROs are "real police officers", but

that implementing a SRO program should not be viewed as a “trap” for students that results in children being introduced to the criminal justice system without a true justification of “criminal behavior”. Elementary students might view a uniformed officer as “scary or intimidating”, so there could be a need to “soften” the image of a police officer on campus, while for other students seeing an officer carrying a weapon in full uniform will not have any impact at all.

Any law enforcement officer would say that protecting the well-being of the public is their top mission. Rosiak (2009) says that “Many problems in the community are manifested in the school every day, so it is fitting and necessary that law enforcement officers work with the school and other community partners in providing safe and healthy school environments” (p.3). According to the Texas School Safety Center (n.d.) “Until the late 1990s, the use of law enforcement assigned to school was limited. During the 2003-2004 school year, principals reported law enforcement in 36 percent of schools, increasing to 40% by 2007-2008” (para. 3).

## **POSITION**

Current times call for proactive and creative planning for all educational and law enforcement careers. What worked ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago, is now severely outdated, and ineffective. As the times change and communities and school’s needs change, law enforcement must be willing to look at a variety of trends to stay on top of the everchanging demands. SROs have the potential to build relationships with students that can deter crime or illegal behavior in youth, and “SROs maintain “open-door” policies towards students, engage in counseling sessions, and refer students to social-services, legal-aid, community-services, and public health agencies as part of

their role as counselor and mentor” (Canady, James, & Nease, 2012, p. 27). School resource officers serve as a vital member of the “village” that is charged with the raising and molding of young people in a community. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, “In this role, the SRO functions much as a community police officer would on his or her beat-getting to know the locals and getting involved with their daily lives” (Canady et.al., p. 27).

The students are the future of the community and the effects of good police and community relationships can create lasting impressions on a community. These relationships lead to insight into a child’s daily life, changes in family situations, and strengthen the family attitudes about law enforcement. “Kids who grow up having positive experiences with cops will hopefully maintain these impressions as adults” (Klein, 2016, para. 4). Klein (2016) states, “Any school that doesn’t have a police officer trained by NASRO, doesn’t yet know what they’re missing. What we’re doing in schools should hopefully transition out into the community” (para. 5).

SROs carry out a very important role in their daily work schedule. A SRO has the opportunity to mentor youth, and this can help to eliminate the need for future “police” interactions. Effective SRO programs do not only utilize an officer on secondary level campuses, in fact “many elementary school leaders are experimenting with SROs in the hopes that the “legal socialization” at an early age can help prevent behavior problems in the middle and high school year” (Chen, 2018, para. 4).

Officers are not only in the school to protect the students from harm, but also, and most importantly, they are there to become a friend and trusted confidant to students. Bill Bond, with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, is a

high school principal in Kentucky who has been through a school shooting. He states in Education World that “SROs are an excellent tool to have in schools for students to communicate to. Students will want to confide in them and get information from them.” (“School resource officers,” n.d., para. 13).

The SRO must learn how to carry themselves and communicate effectively to ensure they do not come across as a “know it all”, or a person that does not know anything about school, and current trends so that students, teachers, and even parents feel they can speak openly to them about concerns, or problems encountered. School administration and the law enforcement agency that the SRO works for should work together to select the best qualified officer for the role of SRO. Not every officer is cut out to work with students and the officer’s personality, age, and past experiences must be considered when placing an officer in the school system.

Schools that employ a SRO have a direct first line of defense in the case of any type of dangerous situation. School officers are trained to run towards the gun shots not away. As stated by Rosiak (2009), “Communities must work together to ensure the safety of all members and the safety-learning connection is clear, if schools are not safe, children will not find themselves in an environment in which they can learn” (p.1). Keeping schools safe requires officers be openminded to new ways of policing and new obstacles as well because “the protection of children in schools is a constant challenge” (Rosiak, 2009, p.1).

Crime and violence prevention statistics are difficult to determine, and the true impact of an SRO is not always easily measurable. However, according to *School Resource Officers* (n.d.), “in a recent survey of SROs 24% reported taking a loaded

firearm from a student, or person on campus, 87% confiscated knives/bladed weapon, and 67% report they prevented a school faculty from being assaulted” (para. 3). One can only wonder what the effect would have been if the SRO had not been on campus. Schools around the nation hold families most prized possessions in their care for eight hours a day. School districts and municipalities owe it to all stakeholders involved to take every step possible to protect this shared precious commodity. Due to the relationships that SROs develop with students, many potentially dangerous situations can be avoided when officers notice changes in behavior patterns, mental states, attendance rates, and overall engagement in the school setting.

The role of a SRO is not to just build relationships, mentor students, and provide a first line of defense. School districts that employ SROs use this position to also teach students about making positive, beneficial choices in life. The SRO is very involved in implementing and “teaching” students through programs like Drug Abuse Resistance Education, (DARE), as well as nation wide awareness activities like Red Ribbon Week, and campus events like career day. Topics differ depending on what level campus the SRO is assigned to, but “bullying, dating violence, internet safety, and drinking and driving are some topics that when presented by law enforcement take on a more real world application, and use the SRO’s first- hand experience to reinforce importance of each topic” (Canady et.al., 2012).

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

A school district’s top priority is the wellbeing of the children it serves every day. There are multiple theories about what actions and beliefs are considered “best practices”, however, one area where schools struggle in is the idea of discipline. Many



districts have implemented a zero tolerance policy as a means of keeping students safe. However, schools that implement a zero tolerance policy and have SROs involved in the discipline issues create the problem of normal school issues becoming “police issues”. These situations lead to students being entered into the criminal justice system for issues that are school based, that can be handled, possibly more appropriately, in the school system. Discipline that would have once been handled by teachers or principals are now being handed to the SRO. This discipline switch can lead to an arrest record and introduction to the criminal justice system (Zalatoris, 2015). Without clear job expectations between the school and police department students are needlessly arrested for minor offenses that are disruptive, but not always deserving of arrest, such as swearing at a teacher or throwing spitballs (Hughes & Fenster, 2011).

In order for this path to be avoided, school districts and municipalities, when employing an SRO, must meet together and create a clear expectation for the campus officer. They are not on campus to do the teacher’s job of classroom discipline or maintaining control of the students. With clear expectations, officers know when to step in and when to allow the school to be in charge of students. This is especially true in middle school and high school campuses because “elementary SROs do not deal with as many law enforcement issues and they adopt a role that is more focused on student relationships” (Curran, 2018). Each campus that employs a SRO must also work together to keep all teachers, staff, and officers informed of what the officer can and will do, and when to get the officer involved in a discipline situation with a child. A SRO should never be used as a scare tactic, or intimidation factor when it comes to working with children.

Schools strive to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere on campus. Police presence and the image of an armed officer at the entrance of a school, or walking the hallways does not create the friendly, welcoming environment. Rather it appears to be a “prison like environment”, instead of a place of education. Students need to feel a connectedness to their school, and “some strategies like metal detectors and security guards might in reality lower student’s sense of school connectedness and thus actually contribute to higher levels of school violence and disorder” (Theriot, 2016, p. 448).

The SROs’ attitude and personality will help to ease any negative feelings toward their presence. By talking to students before and after school, being visible in the hallways between classes, giving high fives, and greeting students and visitors on campus, citizens will soon see the SRO as a friendly, personable addition to the campus. Theroit (2016) states, “research suggest that SROs can make important contributions to improve school’s physical environment. These improvements can lead to reduced violence and a greater sense of school connectedness in students” (p. 463).

School resource officers are often seen as “subpar” and not “real” officers. This view can come from within the law enforcement community, as well as the general public. When officers are viewed this way it can lead to the SRO feeling isolated and rethinking their career placement. In a recent interview with John McDonald, the security chief of Jefferson County, Colorado, school district, which includes Columbine High School, McDonald states that officers enter into law enforcement to protect their communities from harm, and catch criminals, not work in the school system (Saul, Williams, & Hartocollis, 2018).

Just as in any job, there are many hats that are worn by law enforcement officers. Individuals who serve as SROs value the connection they have with their campus and understand that they are serving and protecting their community the same way as a patrol officer or investigator is, no one position is more important. In order for a SRO to be beneficial and effective, the individual must know how to change roles from mentor, teacher and officer depending on the situation and the fluidity of any given scenario, and that is not a skill all officers have (Saul et al., 2018, para. 13). The SROs come to work every day, not knowing what they will be dealing with. They know that a shooting, a student out of control due to mental health issues, or an emotional teenager who cannot see the lifelong implications of choices are all possible situations they could have to encounter. The SRO must be prepared to find that student help within the school district, or outside the school district. They must know their own department policies as well as the policy of the school district.

A school resource officer is placed in a school as a way to keep the students safe, but in the event of a school shooting, the SRO would become an easy first target for the suspect. Individuals who plan out an attack on a school can watch and study an SRO's movement and habits around campus. For example, "in 1999, there was an armed officer at Columbine High School, and another officer nearby when 13 people were shot by two students" (Zalatoris, 2015, para. 10).

School districts have begun taking the needed steps to create secure buildings, employ trained staff, and continue to learn from events of the past. While there have been times where tragedy occurred, it is essential that stakeholders also consider the lives saved, and scenarios that have been intercepted due to the vigilance of the

campus SRO. As outsiders to situations that usually involve young people's emotions and mental state, SRO cannot know that an attack is going to occur, or that something is even being considered, until it is often times too later, however, "a Congressional Research Service report released after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 implied that the officers' presence was enough to deter assaults and it also caused students to reconsider bringing weapons to campus" (Saul et al., 2018).

While there is no sure fire way to ever completely prepare for unknown situations, being aware that "it" could happen and having a plan is crucial. Amy Kingzett, a SRO in North Dakota, stated after the Parkland, Florida shooting, "We want to make sure we are do everything we can to continue those preparations and maybe learn from unfortunate situations of the past" (Saul et al., 2018, para. 15).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

According to the Texas School Safety Center (n.d.) "a successful SRO program requires selection of the right individuals who find value in working in the school. Providing appropriate training is necessary to give them the skills necessary to work in a new environment" (para. 6). Some individuals within the department and community might question whether the need for a SRO is truly justified at the elementary school level. That SRO is assigned a specific campus to start a safety plan for that campus, conduct the needed lockdown and fire drills, or implement any type of campus security training/practice. The SRO is there to greet that young student in the car drop off or bus every day. They can also reassure students that they will be safe that day and this allows the student to be able to pay attention to their teacher all day.

The SRO will be in the school zones looking for people driving too fast, helping the students across the roadway, and they also free up the on shift patrol officer for the city, which allows them to be patrolling within the city, responding to calls, and working on other requirements. The SROs should lead small programs throughout the school year within a classroom, or for an entire grade level so that all students receive age appropriate information about current safety concerns, and preventative measures. The SRO will be around the cafeteria during lunch talking with students and school staff, and then outside during recess with the students, sometimes playing basketball, football, and kickball.

The SROs in middle and high schools are dealing with students that very often have not had a positive and supportive home life and now are expected to listen and respect a police officer. This often goes against what they have been told by their parents. The SROs are dealing with students trying to figure out what group to hang out with, and how to help steer students to make the right choice of relationships. The SRO must know exactly how a student walks and talks, so that on the back side that SRO could solve a burglary caught on video and the person has their face covered up. The SRO not only has to know the laws on sexting and social media, they now have to teach the students what not to do so that they will not ruin their future from a mistake they made as a teenager. The SRO is not the school disciplinarian. Their number one purpose is school and student safety.

While schools may think that having a zero tolerance policy is a good idea, by working together with the SRO to be proactive instead of reactive, students will begin to realize that no one is “out to get them”, but instead want to teach the appropriate

decisions, but will implement consequences as needed at a school level, not criminal justice system level, depending on severity. SROs no longer arrest a student for a Class “C” charge, but they have to make split second decisions about when they should intervene when a student is out of control during school hours.

As community stakeholders become more comfortable with the police presence in the school, they will begin to see that, despite the “unapproachable uniformed” appearance, the SRO is in fact there to foster relationships and be a positive addition to the school, as well as the community. It is a shift in mindset as well that security measures, like metal detectors, or armed officers, are dangerous and negative. When implementing an effective SRO program, having community discussions, similar to town hall type meetings will prove beneficial, because it will allow for honest direct communication, eliminate rumors and fear in parents.

School resource officers feel a true sense of ownership to their campus, just like street cops do to their communities. Effective and proactive SROs know that they must be vigilant and keep their head on a swivel, just like officers do on the streets. No job in law enforcement is “safe”, and any location for an officer can become a target. In order to provide the most security for the communities’ students, officers need to be in the schools, just like they are at major sporting events, and community activities. Having a first line defense is better than having to wait several minutes for help to be notified and arrive.

In order to create the most effective SRO program that accomplishes the goals of the school, and community, officers must be trained frequently, and appropriately, which in Texas means that school districts educate and train law enforcement who work in the

schools in order for the individual to have the most up to date information and resources for interacting with students (Texas School Safety Center, n.d., para. 7). Knowing that the role of the SRO can change from counselor to teacher to officer requires specific training. Maintaining training will also help to “level the playing field” for officers. While the SRO’s primary duty is to the campus, they are still employed by the municipality, and will still work off campus at times. Their training and skills are equal to all other officers in the department. The difference is they have specialized training for their particular assignment, just like a field training officer, drug recognition expert, or public information officer.

The most effective SRO programs will have open communication between all stakeholders. The members of the school, and municipalities must create a working relationship that is centered on a common goal. In order to get the most success out of the program there must be trust between the city, and the school. All members must realize their role in the well-being of students. For schools, the administration must understand the SRO is not there to intervene in minor behavior infractions and classroom disruptions, and the officer must work diligently to create open honest relationships with all students. This is an issue that must be discussed and understood by all individuals involved; teachers, administration, and the SRO.

The idea behind having a SRO on campus is not to introduce students to the criminal justice system for being silly, making a poor decision, or acting like typical teenagers at school. The SROs purpose is the complete opposite- their presence is for safety and concern for the wellbeing of all. They are there to build relationships with students and ensure that the school is safe from all dangers, including drugs, weapons,

and students. Without the relationship, change will be hard. For the city, they must retain the appropriate officer in the SRO position. The SRO must have a friendly, easy to get to know personality, but not too friendly to where he/she would be swayed by various stakeholders. When all members of this support “team” work together and implement age appropriate policies and procedure that put student’s needs first, true success will occur.

School districts and municipalities working together to insure the safety of the thousands of children they are responsible for keeping safe and protected on a daily basis is the key to a successful and meaningful SRO program. While nothing can prevent 100% of all future attacks on schools, the presence of a SRO can help to make students feel safer, and the possibility that an attack is avoided due to their presence is worth taking. Parents and community members will realize that SROs are not “a scary tactical cop”, but a potential life-saving resource for the community.

According to Canady (2012) “Reductions in school based crime, as well as triad of the other aspects of the SRO’s responsibility, benefit the larger law-enforcement community as well. As the SRO serves both law-enforcement and educational interest, the officer’s work benefits both communities” (p. 26).



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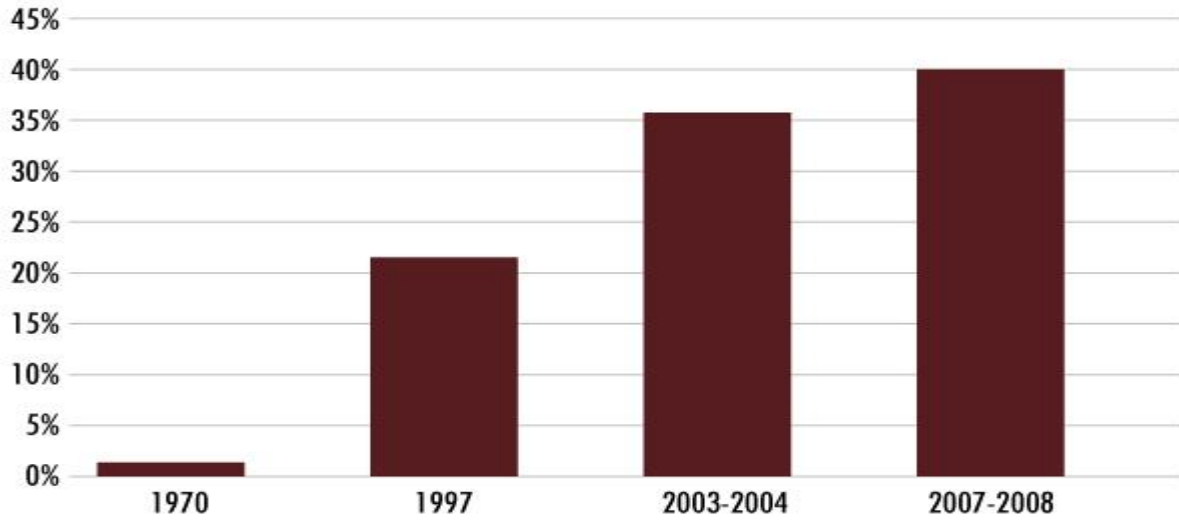
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APPENDIX A

# Percentage of Schools with Law Enforcement, as reported by schools and administrators



Texas School Safety Center, n.d.