

**The Bill Blackwood
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School District Police: Necessity or Nuisance?

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ABSTRACT

School district police are relevant to contemporary law enforcement because this faction of law enforcement provides individuals who are trained to provide law enforcement services in the educational environment. Some of those services include, but are not limited to, penal code, education code, and family code enforcement. In addition to being trained in traditional areas of state statutes, school district officers are highly trained in gang and child abuse investigations.

The purpose of this research is to prove that school district police are a necessity and to explain their function. The research will also prove that many school districts officials prefer their own police force, rather than an officer assigned by a municipal or county agency. The research will encourage other school district to consider starting there own police department.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of articles, internet sites, books on the subject of school policing, and a survey distributed to 47 participants. The articles reviewed provided insight about school policing in the 18th century as well as the current concerns that school police must address. Survey participants offered candid explanations as to why they did or did not support the existence of school district police.

The researcher discovered that school district police are a necessity. Research revealed that students, parents, and school officials are conscious of the current trends of violence on school campuses. Parents and school officials agreed that the services school district police provide is essential in protecting the community's greatest resource, its children.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not school district police are necessary in schools. Since officers employed by school districts are recognized in the state of Texas, the researcher will examine statutes that justify their existence. The issue of how school officers enhance or hinder school administrators, other law enforcement agencies and their effort to suppress crime in the community, will also be explored.

The relevance of school district police to law enforcement is to provide a specialized faction of law enforcement professionals who are trained in traditional areas of Texas law. School district police are also trained in unfamiliar areas such as the Education Code, Family Code, and specific chapters of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure that address juvenile matters. In addition to state laws, school district officers must have knowledge of specific federal laws also.

The purpose of this research is to discover the function of school district police, examine the need to have them, and to encourage other school districts to consider creating their own police department. Many school district officials have contemplated starting their own police departments but have little knowledge of what the duties of a school district police officer would be. The researcher will also examine the reasons why some government entities do not support the existence of school district police officers. The research question to be examined focuses on whether or not school police are needed and the function of this specialized area of law enforcement.

The intended method of inquiry includes a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, journals, a survey distributed to 47 survey participants, and personal

interviews. The survey was distributed to parents of children who attend a school which employs a school district officer. Others were surveyed, and personal interviews were conducted with students, school administrators, and non-school law enforcement officers.

The intended outcome or anticipated findings of the research is that school district police are a necessity for various reasons. School district officials who have their own police department have commented on how the officers assigned to their schools are necessary to maintaining an environment conducive to learning. Other school administrators acknowledged that an on-site officer is critical in the area of discipline management and crime deterrence.

The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research because it will prove that school district police are a needed addition to the police profession. School officers are a relatively unknown resource to other non-school officers and parents regarding to school safety concerns and student behavior. The researcher will also prove that school district officers contribute significantly to the suppression of crime on campuses and in the community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many citizens have noticed the presence of a new faction of law enforcement officer patrolling in and around schools. The public, in addition to many municipal and county law officers, do not quite understand the role, purpose, jurisdiction, or relevance of law enforcement officers on school campuses. Parents often rely on the services of municipal or county law enforcement for offenses committed in the school's jurisdiction because they have not been educated about the school officer's duties and function.

In order to understand the school police officer, one must have a clear understanding of the validity and jurisdiction of such an officer. This information is outlined in 37.081 of the Texas Education Code (Gould, 2008). In essence, this particular statute gives the board of trustees of a school district the authority to employ personnel and commission them as police officers. This statute also gives the board of trustees the task of determining the jurisdiction of the school district police officer. This jurisdiction must include the boundaries of the respective school district. This statute also provides the powers of arrest, search, and seizure, which is granted to any other commissioned peace officer (Gould, 2008).

The school police officer's service ranges from that of a confidant to disciplinarian amongst students. Many students often develop a bond with school officers, especially those assigned to campuses. This bond is usually the result of an inquisitive student asking the officer questions about his job and the officer responding to the question in a manner that allows the child to become comfortable with the officer. "The students that have had contact with me come back to visit me" as referenced by a school resource officer (Scheffer, 1987, p. 26). Once this bond has been established, school officers are often given information about criminal incidents that have occurred or are on the verge of occurring at the school and in the community.

Although school officers' role as confidant is important, their roles are also critical in the prevention of crime on and off campus. Crime on campus is not a new problem for the school officer. According to Bonilla (2000), "school children in 17th century France were often armed, and dueled, brawled, mutinied and beat teachers" (p. 18). Musick (1995), in an effort to show that crimes on campus have continued to be an issue and to

promote the school officer's role is a necessity, compiled the following data, which was retrieved from the past three decades: "In 1981, two million larcenies, 200,000 assaults, 22,000 robberies, and 2,700 rapes were experienced by children while they were on school grounds" (as cited in Flanagan & McLeod, 1983, p. 320-21). Those numbers were shocking for any school district over 25 years ago, and also by today's standard. In 1991-1992, Prince George's Public Schools, in upper Marlboro, Maryland reported, "We've had two attempted homicides, a 200 percent increase in firearms possessions, and a 94 percent increase in knife possessions", said Peter Blauvelt, director of the department of security services for Prince George's County Public Schools (Rotondo, 1993). The numbers have continued to remain excessively high, in spite of school district police being more prevalent. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, during the 2005-2006 school year, there were a reported 17 (14 homicides and 3 suicides) school-associated violent deaths. In 2005, among students ages 12-18, there were about 1.5 million victims of non-fatal crimes at school, including 868,100 thefts and 628,200 violent crimes (simple assault and serious violent crime).

In addition to the aforementioned examples, the school officer's job has grown even more relevant when gang violence, school shootings, and threats of terrorism are factored into the current role of the officer. The campus officer is often the first line of defense if a school shooting or hostage situation takes place. Giduck (2005) warned about the urgency of preparedness and training:

Relevant police departments must begin preparing programs and providing training for local teachers and school officials (including parents). Schools must work hand-in-hand with them to consider and develop protocols for mass

emergency situations and to share knowledge of the chronology of events to be anticipated in a hostage situation. (p. 279)

The officer has to quickly transform from the role of a confidant and take on the role of a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) officer and either neutralize or eliminate the shooter. The school officer is often trained in the area of gang prevention and education. With current laws in place by the Texas penal code, it is a criminal offense for any person to Solicit Gang Activity in Schools (Texas Criminal Law, 2008). Essentially what the law prohibits is any person encouraging or attempting to encourage a child to become indoctrinated in a criminal street gang. The law allows the school officer to file charges against any persons violating this statute which carries a hefty penalty. In addition to the criminal justice system taking a stand against gangs in school, the Gang Resistance and Education Training (GREAT) was also established, specifically to teach officers working in a school district environment to educate students about the perils of becoming involved in a gang or gang culture.

Another aspect of the school police officer's role is the ability to file charges or make arrests for violations of the Texas Penal Code and the Texas Education Code. Penal Code offenses are general laws that any licensed peace officer can enforce. The offenses range from assault to engaging in organized crime. The Education Code set laws specific to education. The laws include, but are not limited to, offenses such as disruption of classes, disruption of transportation, and failure to attend school. The offenses listed in the Texas Education Code are enforced on a daily basis by all school officers. Some municipal police departments are unaware of the existence of such laws

that offer a criminal penalty for Disrupting Class or Disrupting Transportation, which carries a punishable fine not to exceed \$500.00.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) is one of the most important federal laws that the school district officer must adhere to. This federal statute protects the privacy of student education records, which includes the student's name, address, date of birth, and grades. This is relevant to the school officer because if the student is wanted for a crime, investigators with the respective agency may contact the school district police department in an attempt to ascertain a recent address or the date of birth of a student. If that particular student's parents have denied allowing that information to be freely disseminated, the investigator would have to have a subpoena issued by the courts in order to acquire the requested information. The penalty for failure to adhere to FERPA could be the denial of federal funding by the government to the violating school district.

METHODOLOGY

Based upon the aforementioned research, school police are a grave necessity. The method of inquiry that will be used involves several methods. Those methods are personal interviews and questionnaires involving law enforcement personnel within the school district police profession and outside, interviews with parents whose children attend school districts that have their own independent school district (ISD) police department, and interviews with school administrators who have ISD officers working with them on a daily basis.

The researcher will survey officers employed by school districts and parents whose children attend a school district with their own school police department. The

researcher will also survey school administrators who employ school district police and some who only have an officer assigned to them by their local municipality or county agency. The survey will include participants of all ethnic backgrounds, races, and both genders. The information that the researcher gathers will be analyzed and compared to those who do not support the ISD officer's role and considers this faction of policing to be irrelevant to the profession and a nuisance

A total of 41 written surveys will be given to parents of different ethnicity and social economic status in addition to school administrators employed by schools that were recognized by the state of Texas as "Exemplary" as well as schools that were not. Thirty of the surveys will be completed by parents. The remaining 11 surveys will be distributed to school administrators. Five personal interviews will be conducted with school district officers. Two personal interviews will be conducted with school administrators who did not have a police department.

The research survey will consist of eight questions and will be distributed to participants in urban and rural areas in order to gain perspective from a diverse group. Survey participants will consist of various age and races. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed, and then the findings will be conveyed.

FINDINGS

After reviewing the surveys, the researcher found that the majority of those who participated supported school district police officers and, in fact, considered them a necessity. Of the 41 participants, 18 were parents of children who attended a school district that had a police department. Twelve out of the 18, or 66%, supported school district police departments. Ten participants were school administrators whose district

had its own school district officers. Of the ten participants, nine supported school district police, which is 90%. Five participants were school district police officers. All five officers agreed supported school police at 100%. Eight participants were school administrators who did not have a school district police department, but employed officers who worked for the county or municipal police agency in their school district. Five of the eight participants supported school district police, which was 63%.

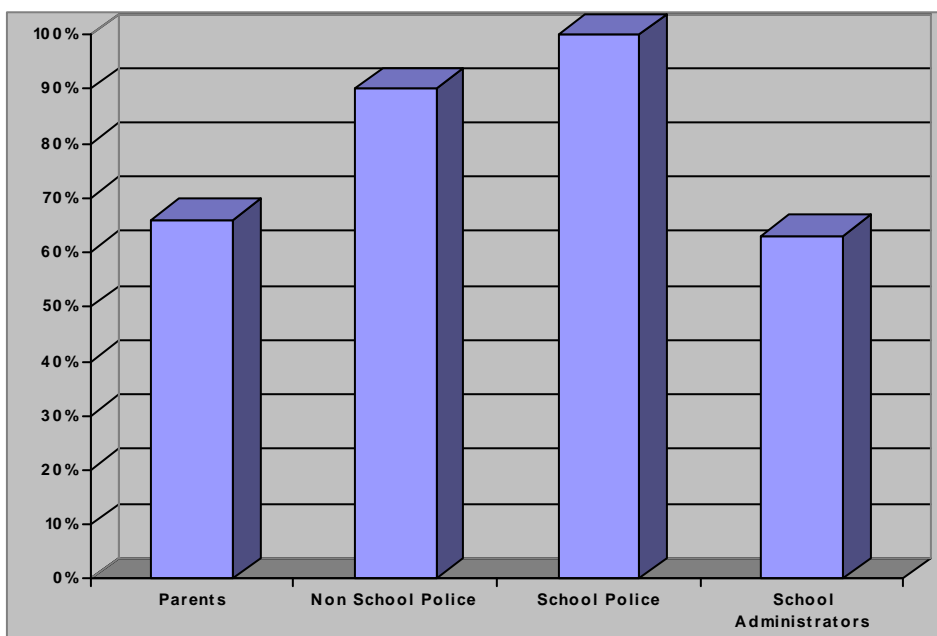


Figure 1. Percentage of supporters of school district police

Participants were asked if they any contact with a school district officer and, if so, how they would rate his/her level of competency. Thirty-eight of the participants stated that they ad contact with a school district officer.. The researcher found that all 38 participants rated the officer's level of competency as high, despite 37% of them not

showing support to school district officers. When asked to elaborate on why one would support school district police, participant's answers ranged from, "the heightened dangers children now face in schools requires a separate police agency" to, "I like the fact that the school officers are trained in all areas of police work especially juvenile law and sexual assault."

The survey also revealed why some were not in favor of school district police. When asked the same question, those not supportive of school district police replied, "Kids will be kids and I just don't like the idea of police officers in the schools. There were times the officers arrested some kids that should have been sent to the principal's office first." When the survey asked participants if their school district police department offered all the services they should, most stated, "Yes" others stated, "no" for different reasons. One participant stated, "I would like to see the police department take part in more community events and traffic directing duties." While another participant stated, "I wish they could take fingerprints and get back some of the stuff my kids had stolen from them at school." A participant reported the officers at the school district seem to be more personable than "regular police."

Of the school administrators surveyed who employed a county or municipal agency, more than half (63%) supported school police officers. Some of the administrators stated they would rather have their school district develop their own police department because they feel "there is a solid connection when you know the officer is employed from the same source as the school administrators." Of the 38% that said otherwise, a few cited reasons such as, "I don't think our school district is large enough to sustain it's own school district police department" and "the officer employed

with us by the city is only going to work here for nine months, the rest of the time he will be assigned to other police duties, he will have served his purpose and we don't see the need for a full time force."

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The question still remains about whether school district police are considered a necessity or a nuisance. The purpose of this study was answer to this question based upon surveys, personal interviews of non-school district police personnel, parents, school police officers, school administrators who worked with school district police officers, and those who worked with municipal and county police officers who were assigned to their school campuses. The reason for the this particular topic was due to the researcher frequently having contact with parents and non-school district officers who either did not have knowledge of the school district officers role and job duties or was given wrong information about the school district officers which contaminated their opinion of this faction of law enforcement and considered them a nuisance. The researcher was confident that law enforcement would benefit from the research and deem school district police as a necessary addition to the police profession, school districts, and to the community.

According to the findings, it is clear that those who represent the community are receptive and appreciative to the school district officer. The majority of parents surveyed expressed concern for their child's safety and agreed that a school district should in fact have their own means of protection of students, independent of school administrators, and officers assigned to schools by local governments. Supportive school administrators agree that their own in-house police agency is needed and accepted as a

true commodity regarding to safety and helping to maintain an environment conducive to educating students. The researcher is confident that the findings of this study will benefit the public and other school districts that are interested in creating their own school district police department to further ensure the safety and well-being of their community's most valuable resource, its children.

The researcher also discovered that although some school districts anticipate the creation of their own police departments, there are several challenges that may thwart their efforts. The most prevalent is budgetary restraints due to the present state of the economy. School districts, like commercial enterprises, are being directed to be frugal in spending and to avoid large purchases for non-existent programs in an effort to maintain funds and prevent the possibility of work force reduction. The solution to this issue is a bond proposal, which effectively informs the community of the need for a permanent, specialized police force to ensure their child's welfare. The other option to consider is a grant from the Office of Homeland Security, which allocates funds to local government entities, including school districts, to create or retain law enforcement officers at their agencies.

The issue of the need for school district police will continue to be important due to mounting social issues and concerns, both locally and nationally. Crimes on campus will continue to occur in spite of budgetary restraints or the opinion of some who question school district officer's existence. However, when it comes to combating crimes against students and providing a sense of security, which is essential in the educational process, school district police officers prove they are a necessity, not a nuisance, to the law enforcement profession and the community.

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APPENDIX 1

School District Police Survey

Please read and answer the following questions. Please return this survey to Jim Banks. Thank you.

1. Does your child attend a school district that has its own School District Police Dept?
2. Have you had any contact with a school district police officer? If so, how would you rate the officer's competency level as it pertained to the contact with him/her (On a scale from 1 to 5. 5 being excellent)?
3. Which entity would you prefer to ensure your child's safety at school? Circle one.
 - a. School District Police
 - b. A City or County officer assigned to your child's school
 - c. None of the above, the school administration is sufficient
 - d. None of the above, I don't believe my child's safety is in jeopardy at school
4. Please briefly explain your answer to question # 3. If you circle letter "d", disregard this question.
5. Does your School District Police Dept. offer all the services you feel they should offer?
Yes or No
6. What service(s) should they offer? What services shouldn't they offer?
7. Do you have any concerns or knowledge of excessive criminal behavior in or around your child's school? Yes or No

8. What is your opinion of School District Police Departments?

- A. They are a necessity
- B. They are not nuisance
- C. It does not matter

Thanks for participating in this survey