

## LWV Park Ridge Observer Report

**Meeting:** Park Ridge-Niles School District 64

**Date:** June 11, 2018

**Observer:** Mary C. Fontaine  
session)

**Start/End Time:** 6:00-8:30 (followed by closed

**Members Absent:** None. School administrators (including Superintendent Laurie Heinz) and the district's attorney (Anthony J. Loizzi, Sr.) were also present.

The open portion of the meeting dealt exclusively with the School Resource Officer (SRO) program for Emmerson and Lincoln Schools being considered by the Board. Citizen comments were made at the end of the meeting, following the Board's discussion, to enable citizens to comment on the discussion. The closed portion dealt with the Superintendent's evaluation.

### **Discussion/Action:**

No actions requiring a formal vote were taken at this meeting. A summary of Board discussion and Citizen comments follow. Please note that this report is not intended to endorse any of the opinions expressed below. It merely represents a good faith effort to describe in brief what participants in the meeting said. Any summary is inherently incomplete, and readers are encouraged to visit District 64's website to view a video of the proceeding for more detailed information.

#### *Board discussion:*

The Board first revisited the question of whether the Board should continue to pursue an SRO program at this time. Three Board members (Messrs. Sanchez, Tui and Baigi) expressed the view that the Board should not do so, and the remaining members (Messrs. Ryles, Sotos, Borrelli and Eggemann) thought the Board should continue to work on the program.

Reasons expressed by Board members for terminating or tabling discussions of the program included the following:

- (i) The prior meeting's budget discussion presented several matters that required funding (including improvements to the special education program) on a higher priority basis than the SRO program, and the shortage of funds already required the Board to consider a new bond offering. There was no reason to run a pilot, partial program (estimated cost \$40,000) unless the Board anticipated the creation of a more robust program (estimated cost between \$200,000 and \$400,000), and the District could not afford that cost for a 'would like to have' program when 'must have' programs were underfunded.

- (ii) There was not a consensus on the Board as to the purpose for the SRO program. Was it to (a) improve discipline and deter bad behavior, (b) provide safety to students, (c) improve community relations with the police, or (d) provide another trusted adult to whom students could turn for counseling? Different Board members seemed to have different opinions on this question.
- (iii) If the purpose of the pilot was not intended to lead to a larger program, it was not clear that having a police officer in the school six or eight hours a week would make a meaningful impact, particularly when compared to a full time trained counselor on staff at the school.
- (iv) There did not appear to be buy-in from various stakeholders in the community. A number of parents expressed concerns (as described in the citizen comment section below). It was unclear whether the local police wanted, or were properly trained to, play a role in school discipline or counseling. In particular, the Park Ridge Police Department was understaffed and would only be able to provide officers working overtime hours as SRO officers. Based on conversations with the city's attorneys, the police seemed focused on limiting their liability.
- (v) If the primary goal was to improve discipline, the Board should see if changes proposed in the budget (including new counselors/social workers, a new vice principal at Emmerson and additional training for all teachers) achieved that objective before bringing in an SRO.
- (vi) Student relations with the police can be improved by other means, such as police officer visits to classrooms and presentations at assemblies, at the expense of the police department.

Reasons expressed by Board members for continuing the discussion of the SRO program included the following:

- (i) Based on conversations between Board members and parents in the community, there were many parents who want an SRO program.
- (ii) Safety of children is a high priority. It should not have a price tag.
- (iii) Security is not the 'driving factor', and the SRO would not be searching lockers. The main purpose was to allow relationships to develop between the SRO and students.
- (iv) Surrounding districts have SRO programs, and District 64 should have implemented one years ago. It is important for the future.
- (v) A pilot is to test the efficacy of an SRO program, not a guaranty that a fuller program be implemented. The Board should focus on the cost of the pilot, not the cost of a hypothetical larger program.

Since the majority of Board members (four of seven) wanted to continue to work on a proposal for an SRO program, the Board then turned to the question of whether a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) should be drafted, in addition to the IGA (Intergovernmental Agreement) with the cities of Park Ridge and Niles. After some discussion, the Board members agreed that an MOU should be prepared, for reasons including the following:

- (i) Members of the public were looking for assurances as to the purpose of the SRO program and the manner in which it would be implemented. The process of drafting the MOU would provide a more concrete avenue for input by community stakeholders. Some Board members were mindful of the fact that there had already been a lot of public discussion and community input, and that ultimately each Board member had a responsibility to make a judgement as to what should be done. However, they agreed that an MOU could help move the project forward.
- (ii) Drafting an MOU would allow the Board to reach consensus as to such purpose and the manner of implementation.
- (iii) An MOU would give clarity to further discussions with the municipalities of Park Ridge and Niles. However, some Board members expressed the view that what the municipalities wanted should not drive what the Board considered to be necessary or appropriate for the program. One asked about the history of existing SRO programs in the local high schools and neighboring districts. Mr. Loizzi said he would investigate further and expressed optimism that District 64's efforts and discussion would result in a better program than had been implemented by other districts.
- (iv) Issues that did not belong in the IGA as a matter of inter-agency contract could be addressed in the MOU.

The Board then created an action item for the June 25 meeting: a committee to draft an MOU would be appointed. Messrs. Sotos and Baigi agreed to be on the committee along with other stakeholders. All Board members were asked to send suggestions as to the committee duties and composition to Superintendent Heinz. Suggestions were to include how to screen and select representatives of parent groups. City council liaisons would be invited to join the committee. Representatives of the police departments and the middle school administration were discussed as having an advisory role.

*Comments from Citizens:*

Fourteen parents of students in District 64 addressed comments to the Board.

Parent #1 strongly supported the implementation of an SRO program, based on her experience as a teacher for 18 years in District 63. District 63's SRO program has been in place for many years, since before the public concern about school gun violence. This parent found the SRO to have a positive impact on students, especially those with special needs or who were targets of bullying.

The SRO was not there to implement discipline, but to make students feel safe. Parent #1 has started a petition drive in support of the SRO program, and asked parents with doubts about the program to be respectful of those who disagreed with them.

Parent #2 noted that District 64, unlike District 63, had experienced some friction between police officers and special needs students, including an incident where a Lincoln student had been handcuffed. This parent did not object to an SRO program so long as (i) the police officers received better training, (ii) police officers were not used for discipline, and (iii) the new head of the District's special education program had input into the design and implementation of the program.

Parent #3 also focused on the diverse needs of students with disabilities. She asked why the District's special education professionals (psychologists, counselors, etc.) had not been consulted about the SRO program. She also expressed surprise that District officials were not requiring the SRO to be trained in dealing with special needs students and did not seem aware that such training programs existed. She noted that not all students with social or emotional disabilities have an IEP and the risk of stigmatizing the students who do have IEPs.

Parent #4 expressed strong doubts about the SRO program. She felt that there were better ways to accomplish the goal of good relations with the police. She had trouble understanding whether Board members saw safety as the goal or not, but in any event did not see how the presence of an officer a few hours a week would further that goal. She wondered if the goal was simply to be able to say something was being done, regardless of its effectiveness. She also expressed concerns about potential liability for the district if the program was implemented.

Parent #5 responded to statements by Board members that a lot of work had already been put into the project. She felt that it was the quality of the work that mattered, not the quantity, and that the quality of the work thus far was poor. She asked by the Board had not responded to petition signed by more than 100 people last fall, and why the purpose of the SRO program was still not clear to the community. In her view, public trust had been eroded. The remedy for this would be to use real research methodology in the pilot, with detailed data collection in the manner recommended by experts. An activity log and anecdotes would not be a substitute for best practices. She continues to believe there is no need for an SRO program and that such a program puts vulnerable students at risk.

Parent #6 acknowledged that not all parents have the same goals and concerns, and that the discussion at this meeting furthered the goal of bringing all views to the table. She asked the board to address concerns about fairness, transparency, the role of the SRO in discipline, the training of SRO officers, on-going communication as to the goals and progress of the pilot with the community, resource allocation and potential liability, including as to civil rights violations.

Parent #7 thanked the Board members for spending substantial time and energy on the welfare of the District's students. However, she was still opposed to the SRO program. She noted that police officers (unlike social workers) are not trained to be counselors and could be dispensing bad advice to students. She also questioned the utility of being present a few hours a week. If the program were to go forward, she felt that the following things were critical: (i) explaining the role of the SRO (i.e., not there to discipline or participate in questioning students) to teachers and students

before the arrival of the SRO, (ii) collecting meaningful data in accord with standard research methods, and (iii) involving school counselors in the design and implementation of the program.

Parent #8 also objected to the SRO program, for reasons that have been articulated to the Board by parents for six months. She noted that everyone wants to keep children safe, but reports and research available to the Board find no measurable connection between that goal and having an officer with a gun in the schools as contemplated by the program. This parent felt that the Board had been dismissive of parent concerns, including concerns that the program could actually interfere with social emotional learning. If the District were serious about protecting students from gun violence, it would regularly remind parents to lock their guns and keep the guns out of the reach of children. In fact, this parent had asked the Superintendent to send such a reminder on the date of the Parkland walkouts but received no response to her suggestion. The parent asked if the District was afraid to take a stand than might anger gun owners.

Parent #9 expressed respect for the police but confusion as to what the purpose of the SRO program was. He thought certain Board members and administrators had indicated that the purpose was to improve discipline. This parent did not see this as an appropriate purpose. A police officer could not remedy poor school administration as to discipline. He also expressed concern that a rotating cast of officers could not build trust with the students, and that any program needed to guard against racial discrimination.

Parent #10 also stated that the SRO should have nothing to do with discipline. An overworked officer with no training in the field would not be effective. Also, certain minority groups in the community did not trust the police to act fairly and involving the police in school discipline would only aggravate that community problem.

Parent #11 also worked with special needs students in District 63, and praised the work on Parent #1 with a very demanding segment of the student population. He noted that teachers and staff in District 63 had more training in areas like conflict de-escalation and special education than average for the area. Based on his experience with the District 63 SRO program, he noted the following ways in which he felt the District 64 draft proposal should be improved: (i) the SRO should not issue tickets to students (which they are doing in the high schools to negative effect), (ii) the SRO should not be involved in questioning students, as it is very frightening for a child to be questioned by the police and the police could easily mishandle the situation, (iii) the special education staff of the schools needed to be actively involved in the program, as the police are not trained to identify and react to the unique behavior of these students, and (iv) the employment history of any proposed SRO should be examined, because in the past a few officers in Park Ridge have used excessive force with minors and police department problems (including low morale) should not be brought into the schools.

Parent #12 asked the Board to remember that, while there is overlap between the SRO issues and issues with the District's special education programs, the two subjects are distinct. The Board should not assume that parents active in one area are completely aligned with parents active in the other. This parent continued to be concerned that the SRO program would drain resources from more important objectives. Still, she thanked the Board for its willingness to set up an advisory committee from the community for special education issues and to work with parents on the MOU

for the SRO program. Better collaboration between parent groups and the Board, and less divisiveness, would be in the best interest of the students.

Parent #13 said that her comments would just highlight a few issues from a document that was being sent by a group of parents to the Board. Her top concerns were as follows. First, there needs to be a process by which parent concerns and complaints will be addressed. The police department complaint procedure is not adequate for this purpose. The priorities of the police and the school department are not the same. Second, the SRO officers need to be trained in a variety of areas, including bias, civil rights and special needs. Parents feel that district administrators have not adequately considered and researched the options in this regard.

Parent #14 thanked the Board for slowing down the SRO project. Everyone agrees that children should be safe. This parent felt the district could do a better job of teaching children to keep themselves safe. This would include creating a culture of non-violent communication, restorative justice and other constructive methods of dealing with conflict. Teachers, who were in the school full time, are in a better position to model and guide this behavior than a part-time police officer.

**League Action Needed:** None at this time.