



June 24, 2020

Senator Douglas McCrory
Representative Robert Sanchez
Senator Eric Berthel
Representative Kathleen McCarty
Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
The State Capitol
Hartford, Connecticut 06106-1562

Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel and Representative McCarty:

Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut (SEEK) is committed to ensuring a strong education for all children in Connecticut and specifically to students with disabilities. We understand from media reports that the Legislature will consider legislation on police accountability during the upcoming special session. We write to urge you to include in that legislation provisions removing uniformed, armed police officers from Connecticut schools. The presence of these law enforcement officials can have profoundly negative effects on students, particularly students with disabilities and students of color. Employing school resource officers (SROs) consumes resources that would be better applied to providing social emotional education and trauma-informed supports for the large number of students in need. A number of organizations, including Connecticut Voices for Children, the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union, and the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, have drafted legislation (attached) to accomplish this.

Police were placed in schools in large numbers in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook. They were deployed to ensure the safety of the school from outside intruders. Sadly, there is no data to support the supposition that having police inside schools reduces school shootings. From what we have seen, police in schools are ineffective and have not resulted in any positive change in student challenging behaviors. Indeed, logic suggests that police outside the school building would be more effective in reducing violence than police in the school building.

According to a March 26, 2018 report of the Office of Legislative Research, around two-thirds of Connecticut school districts utilize SROs. Districts can spend up to \$200,000 a year for two or three uniformed police officers. The duties and funding of any school resource officer is

provided for in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which, under Public Act 15-168, needs to be entered into between the local board of education and the local law enforcement agency. Notwithstanding the clear prohibitive language of these MOUs, school administrators often use SROs to enforce discipline within school. As a result, the presence of police officers in Connecticut schools leads to a higher average of student arrests. <https://ctvoices.org/publication/policing-connecticuts-hallways-the-prevalence-and-impact-of-school-resource-officers-in-connecticut/>. While the state has worked diligently to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions, the number of in-school arrests continues to rise.

The disproportionate impact on students of color and on students with disabilities is significant. As Commissioner Cardona reported to the State Board of Education on February 6, 2020, "Large disparities remain in suspension rates between Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students and their white counterparts. While one out of every 25 white students received at least one suspension, one out of every seven Black/African American students and one out of every 10 Hispanic/Latino students experienced the same sanction." While the overall suspension rate was 6.7%, the rate for students with disabilities was 11.1%. Black and Hispanic students accounted for 63% of school-based arrests, while accounting for only 40% of Connecticut's students. Students attending schools with SROs were at greater risk of discipline overall. The average arrest rate of Latino students at schools with an SRO was six times greater than the average arrest rate of Latino students at schools without an SRO, according to the Voices for Children study.

The problem with uniformed, armed police officers in schools goes far deeper than that. Children of color and children from poverty often grow up with a well-founded abiding fear of the police. It would be superfluous to recount the reasons for that terror at this time. Turning schools into law enforcement agencies with frightening armed officers in the hallways exacerbates the fears and uncertainties of many students, and undermines the fundamental purpose of schools, i.e. learning. No student can learn while being traumatized. This fear pervades many students with disabilities as well who know that SROs often do not understand their disabilities or even think it important to consider their disability. The legion cases in which an individual with autism is arrested and abused by police officers is reason enough for that fear.

We know from our work in the field that SROs lack sufficient training in dealing with students on the autism spectrum. In many cases involving SRO arrests, a principal or school social worker decided, often impulsively, that the school resource officer should handle an issue. The SRO's solution was to arrest the kid. Yet, the real origin of the "problem" was a learning issue or regular behavior for a student with autism. It's a very sad thing to see the light in a kid's eyes turned off over an arrest in his school. Indeed, arrests at the high school level frequently lead to students dropping out of educational altogether. While the issue of armed police officers in school is usually seen as a race issue, we see it as a disability issue as well.

The cost of school resource officers is high. The cost of a police officer is at least equivalent to that of a school social worker. While a police officer brings fear and top-down authority into a school building, a social worker can promote the sort of social emotional learning that can prevent acts of violence from ever occurring. A supportive school, utilizing trauma-informed practice, conflict resolution, de-escalation, and restorative justice, can do far more to keep the peace than can a police officer. The attached legislation mandates re-focusing resources away from law enforcement and to school climate.

School climate change needs to come as part of the removal of armed police officers from school. Increasingly, and far too often, school administrators call the police when they face a behavioral issue in their school. Whether there is an SRO in the school or not, police respond to these calls by using the power of arrest. Arresting a student does not deal with the social and emotional issues, often trauma-based, faced by a student. There are excellent blueprints available for Social Emotional Learning available, particularly from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, which need to be implemented to ensure that the police do not need to be called.

The police accountability legislation to be considered by the Legislature may be the best opportunity to make our schools safe and harbors for learning, with resources to address the needs of all students, rather than scary, law enforcement agencies. The negative social and emotional impacts of students due to armed police in the schools is intolerable. Funds should be redirected to professional therapists and social workers to help students with behavioral challenges. School administrators must change their approach from one of law enforcement to one of social emotional and trauma-informed education.

Sincerely yours,

Barbara Distinti

Barbara Distinti
President

AN ACT CONCERNING THE DISSOLUTION BETWEEN BOARDS OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS, CREATING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL RESOURCE COUNSELORS, AND THE PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

[Section 10-233m](#) - Section 10-233 of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (Effective July 1, 2020):

Sec. 1 (NEW) (Effective July 1, 2015) Each local or regional board of education shall not assign a school resource officer to any school under the jurisdiction of such board nor enter into a memorandum of understanding with a local law enforcement agency regarding the role and responsibility of such school resource officer. Each local or regional board of education shall instead assign a school resource counselor in lieu of any school resource officer in equal number.

- (1) Any such school resource counselor must be a part of all staff meetings and shall be trained, provided ongoing support, and work in collaboration with administrators, teachers, social workers and other school staff to best support students in their time at school and ensure safe and positive school climates.*
- (2) Local or regional boards of education may collaborate with community based organizations via a memorandum of understanding to train and support school resource counselors. Such memorandum of understanding shall include provisions addressing how trainings and supports enable positive, asset-based approaches to school climate and discipline, including but not limited to: (i) Trauma-informed practice; (ii) Child and adolescent development and psychology; (iii) Comprehensive youth development practices and programming; (iv) Conflict resolution and peer mediation; (v) De-escalation techniques; (vi) Violence prevention and intervention; (vii) Intergroup and interethnic conflict, intervention and truce-building strategies; (viii) Bias-based and sexual harassment and sexual violence; (ix) Working with youth with disabilities or physical, emotional, or behavioral conditions; (x) Working with LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming youth; (xi) Cultural competencies (including understanding and addressing racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, adultism/ageism, and other implicit and explicit biases); (xii) The impacts of arrest, court, detention, incarceration and/or deportation on youth life chances; (xiii) Effective strategies for building safe schools without relying on punitive or exclusionary discipline; (xiv) Restorative and transformative justice practices; (xv) School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; and/or (xvi) Other positive approaches to school climate and discipline being used in the district.*
- (3) School resource counselors may, among other duties, work with students, parents, and community leaders to ensure a welcoming environment for educators, students, parents and community members, understand the strengths and resources of the school community to build that positive environment and coordinate appropriate preventative*

and time-sensitive intervention to address conflict or disruptive behaviors, intergroup or interethnic tension and address safety concerns in a way that protects the health, well-being and human rights of students, parents and staff, and address students' needs.

(4) Local and regional boards of education shall intentionally recruit and hire Black and Latino school resource counselors for the purposes of ensuring these staff reflect the communities in which they are working.

(5) Local or regional boards of education shall monitor implementation and provide support and coaching for schools that are struggling to implement these practices.

For the purposes of this section, "school resource officer" means a sworn police officer of a local law enforcement agency or a sworn officer of the Division of State Police within the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection who has been assigned to a school pursuant to an agreement between the local or regional board of education and the chief of police of a local law enforcement agency or the commanding officer of the Division of State Police, and "school resource counselor" means a new or existing person who is employed by a school in an administrative capacity under the jurisdiction of a local or regional board of education and has a role of guidance counselor, social worker, psychologist, school aide, other staff member who has the appropriate training and ongoing supports to meet the duties included above.

[Subsection \(2\) of Section 10-198d](#) of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (Effective July 1, 2020):

(NEW) The chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan may include, but need not be limited to the following: (A) A research-based, trauma-informed, and data-driven mentorship model that addresses and attempts to reduce chronic absenteeism through the use of mentors, such as students, teachers, school counselors, mental health professionals, administrators, intramural and interscholastic athletic coaches, and community partners, and (B) incentives and rewards that recognize schools and students that improve attendance and reduce the school chronic absenteeism rate.