REPLACING SCHOOL POLICE WITH TARGETED STUDENT RESOURCES

Emily Hughes  Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor and Bouma Fellow in Law at the University of Iowa School of Law Fellow, The Justice Collaborative Institute

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The movement to redirect police funding towards social services and community care has ignited calls to re-examine police presence in schools. In the last month alone, several school districts have decided to disband school-based officers while urging their communities to shift funding towards other necessary services.

Consider Portland, Oregon. On June 4, 2020, Portland Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero announced that Oregon’s largest school district would “discontinue[e] the regular presence of school resource officers” and “increase spending on social workers, counselors and culturally-specific supports for students.” Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler echoed this sentiment, explaining the decision to “discontinue using school resource officers in two smaller metropolitan districts under a program that in total costs the city $1.6 million a year.” In Wheeler’s words, “Leaders must listen and respond to the community. We must disrupt the patterns of racism and injustice.”

Other districts are headed in the same direction. Two days before the Portland announcement, the Minneapolis school district suspended its school resource program, and the Denver Post reported on June 5 that two members of the Denver school board had “called for the removal of police officers from the city’s public schools by the end of the year, saying law enforcement personnel not only are unnecessary on campuses, but detrimental to students of color.” Charlottesville, Virginia also disbanded its school-based police programs, while teachers unions in Oakland, Chicago, Madison, and Seattle are urging the same.

Instead of relying on police to fulfill core educational functions, now is the time for schools to fund mental health professionals, academic support, and other evidence-based programs. Particularly in light of the twin pandemics of coronavirus and engrained structural racism, the scarce funding available should focus on what works best for students.

Schools need evidence-based resources

The use of school resource officers has grown in recent years despite the lack of research correlating increased police presence with reduced school violence. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 43% of public schools nationwide had an armed law enforcement officer present at least once a week in the 2015-2016 school year, which is the latest available data. And while costs vary widely, the ACLU compiled data on Washington’s school-based resource officers and found that schools were paying an average yearly salary of $62,000 (and as much as $125,000) for each school officer.

Instead, the research shows that schools need more social services and other evidence-based resources. Rather “than investing in police,” the ACLU urges schools to “prioritize counselors, mental health professionals, social workers, teacher training and evidence-based programs to improve the school climate” because “[t]hese investments are more effective at reducing routine adolescent misbehavior and addressing the underlying social causes that may be contributing to it.”

In the face of limited budgets and stressed economies, schools must make difficult decisions with scarce funds. By redeploying dollars,
schools can strive to meet students’ urgent needs. Whether schools resume remotely or in person, students need help to close the COVID-gap, not to mention other gross disparities that existed long before the pandemic. Some students will need mental health counseling to cope with the pandemic or to understand the evolving discussion regarding each of our roles in eradicating racism. Other children have fallen behind through the school closures and will need academic support to stay at grade level. Others will need help understanding how to be remote learners, especially if the coronavirus continues to keep school buildings closed.

Even groups that once wanted school resource officers now recognize that resources are better directed to evidence-based methods. For example, the Madison teachers’ union—known as Madison Teachers Inc.—had historically supported school resource officers, but recently changed its position. In so doing, the union noted that it has “become apparent from conversations with our children and community that the benefits of having police officers stationed inside our schools is outweighed by the racialized trauma experienced by some of our community members of color. Changing our position centers our students' needs.”

### School resources through a racial justice lens

The presence of school resource officers seems to exacerbate the racialized trauma that some students of color experience as well as fueling the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, Cornell Law Professor Michael Heise and University of Florida Law Professor Jason Nance, who have analyzed police presence in schools, note that despite the fact that the daily work of SRO/police officers varies “considerably across the nation and from school to school,” a “school’s SRO/police presence exerts upward influence on schools’ inclination to report” school disciplinary incidents to law enforcement agencies. In other words, “across virtually all” of the models Heise and Nance examined, the presence of school police meant more school-based discipline funneled out of the school and into the juvenile justice system.

While Heise and Nance’s study identified a need for more comprehensive individual-level data to assess racial disparities, researchers have studied the disproportionate impact of school policing on students of color. A Department of Education study observed over a decade ago that “[n]ationwide, there is significant evidence that school police programs disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities.” The Department of Education study also “found that over 70 percent of students involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement are Hispanic or African-American, despite making up significantly less of the student population.”

Despite being around 12% of the student population, Black students are 2.3 times as likely as white students to be arrested in school or referred to law enforcement. Additionally, a 2018 report by The Advancement Project (based on Department of Education data) showed that, nationally, Black and Brown students are more likely to be arrested by school police even though they do not misbehave more often than white students. Some of the students arrested are also special needs. According to the Department of Education, students with disabilities represent only 12% of student enrollment, but they represented 28% of students referred to law enforcement or arrested at school.

The race disparities extend beyond the school-to-prison pipeline and indicate a need for other resources in schools. A 2016 White House report details how disparities in the use of
harsh discipline went hand-in-hand with a lack of funding for support staff and services for students. The report also revealed that students of color “are between roughly 20 and 40 percent more likely to be one of the 1.6 million students who attend school where there is a school law enforcement officer but no guidance counselor.” This finding suggests that students of color may be receiving disproportionately more policing and less access to social services.

Educational best practices suggest that students need support and services more than they do law enforcement presence in schools. Although proponents of school resource officers assert that officers build relationships with students, available data suggests that officers spend more of their time doing law enforcement than mental health counseling.

**CONCLUSION**

Removing police officers from schools must go hand-in-hand with investing resources in mental health and academic support, plus positive evidence-based measures. These combined actions can help schools develop resources where students need them the most, thereby serving a key role in schools’ plans to return to the classroom this fall.

To be sure, police officers will always have a critical role in maintaining safety in the community. By re-allocating resources toward targeted needs, police interventions inside schools can become increasingly rare responses to isolated emergencies, rather than part of the fabric of a school’s daily life. As the Madison’s teacher’s union explained in its decision advocating to replace school-based officers with counselors and mental health professionals, if “we are serious about being anti-racist” as a community, “we must fully support our students, not just by subtracting one group, but significantly adding another.”

Now is the time for school districts to have candid conversations about the cost and impact of police presence in their schools, especially because local decision makers, including school boards, teachers, principals, and parents—together with students—have the power to make it happen.