

Testimony Submission from the National Association of School Resource Officers, Inc., RE Senate Bill 245

By Mo Canady, Executive Director, National Association of School Resource Officers, Inc.

The National Association of School Resource Officers, Inc. (NASRO) is a non-profit organization established to support school-based law enforcement officers, school administrators, and school safety/security professionals, as they work in partnership with their school district and school community to protect students, faculty and staff, and others in the school environment by providing the highest quality of training. NASRO offers the following courses: Basic SRO, Advanced SRO, SRO Supervisors and Managers, School Safety Officer, Adolescent Mental Health Training, and Crime Prevention through Environmental Design.

Events occurring during the past year initiated the public's call for transformation of law enforcement, likely necessary in many communities. NASRO attests, however, that removal or restriction of school resource officers from serving as safety partners in the school environment would increase the risk of school violence and decrease opportunities for law enforcement to both build positive relationships with youth and educate and informally counsel students about public safety and law-related matters, all of which enhance school and community safety.

The National Police Foundation's Averted School Violence Database includes multiple situations in which school resource officers have successfully intervened to prevent acts of violence through investigation or tactical actions. Prevention of violence is critical to enabling student to learn. Just as important, however, are the principles of community policing regularly employed by school-based law enforcement which, when applied effectively, establish trust with students, collaboration with the school community, i.e., administrators, faculty and staff, parents, and students, and facilitate problem-solving on safety-related issues.

Often calls for the removal or reformation of school resource officers is premised on a lack of or limited understanding of the role school resource officers fulfill or the training school resource officers typically complete. NASRO endorses the following best practices.

School Resource Officers are Valuable When Best Practices are Followed

SROs are career law enforcement officers with sworn authority who are deployed by employing police departments or agencies in community-oriented policing assignments to work in collaboration with schools. Carefully-selected, specially-trained SROs provide many benefits, including:

- Development of potentially lifelong, positive relationships with students of all demographics.
- Prevention of on-campus violence through appropriate interventions before violence occurs.
- Mitigation of unpreventable violent incidents through immediate response.
- Reduction of the likelihood that a student will enter the justice system.
- Reduction of the need for schools to call 911.
- Increase of the likelihood that students (particularly those with mental-health issues) will get the help they need from social service and health care systems.
- Provision of valuable law-related information during classroom presentations.
- Prevention or minimization of property damage in the school and surrounding areas.

A community that is not experiencing all of the benefits listed above likely is not adhering to all the many best practices that the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) has developed.

Careful Selection

Communities must select SROs carefully, choosing those who have:

- At least three years of street experience;
- Demonstrated ability to work with youth (e.g. through volunteering in youth athletic programs);
- Clean disciplinary records;
- Excellent community relations skills.

In short, officers considered for SRO positions should be the “cream of the crop.” No agency should put officers in schools to get them off the streets (because of issues with their work or because of declining capabilities), as punishment, or without the officers’ strong desire to work in schools.

Specialized Training

School policing *must* be different than street patrol. Specialized training, therefore, is as essential to SROs as it is to other law enforcement specialties, such as hostage negotiation or SWAT. No community should assign a police officer to a school without first providing specialized training that includes:

- Understanding adolescent brain development and normal childhood behaviors;
- Recognizing and overcoming implicit bias;
- De-escalation, including finding and using alternatives to juvenile justice system referrals;
- Special education, including individualized education plans and their requirements;
- Recognizing and responding appropriately to signs of mental illness and trauma.

The 40-hour Basic SRO Course developed and offered by NASRO covers all the aforementioned and many other essential topics.

Other Best Practices

Written memoranda of understanding between police agencies and school systems are critical to effective school district-law enforcement partnerships. They must codify responsibilities and expectations. For example, both parties must agree that schools will not involve SROs in behavioral issues and disciplinary matters that educators should handle themselves in the absence of police.

School systems must train teachers and administrators on the appropriate roles of SROs and correct those personnel if they summon SROs inappropriately.

Best Practices Lead to Overwhelming Community Satisfaction

NASRO has found that communities which adhere to best practices overwhelmingly indicate satisfaction with their SRO programs. We believe that all communities — including those with significant policing issues — can have the same experience through reform, versus discontinuation of SRO programs.

Specific to Senate Bill 245

- School resource officers can best serve students and their school communities when they offer a visible presence on the school campus and are accessible to and can interact on an informal basis to foster relationships with students and faculty. Restriction of officers' presence in a school building would inhibit officer's ability to do so. They must necessarily have the ability to respond to an emergency involving violence or the threat of violence according to their agency's protocol in addition to in response to a summons by a school administrator or official.
- NASRO supports that school resource officers should complete specialized instruction approved by the local school district and the law enforcement agency, which adheres to the best practices set forth in this testimony.
- School resource officers are on-duty law enforcement officers, and the wearing of civilian clothing and concealment of firearms may not be practical. In situations which pose an imminent threat, officers' uniformed presence can serve as a deterrent factor and can help everyone to quickly identify the acting officer as a law enforcement authority. It is important to remember that safety threats frequently involve individuals who are not students. NASRO believes decisions regarding concealment of firearms and the uniform apparel of school resource officers are best determined by the local school district which is best aware of the culture, climate, and needs of its school communities.
- NASRO endorses the proposal that a school resource officer may not participate in the routine school discipline of a student.