

RECOMMENDATION TO THE SELECT BOARD ON SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS (SROs)

SCHOOL COMMITTEE POSITION

On June 14, 2021, the School Committee voted _____ to recommend ending the School Resource Officer program.

Our rationale for recommending the ending of the SRO program is that both locally and nationally the data shows that African-American/Black and Latinx students feel less safe and less comfortable with SROs. We also believe that police officers should not be providing regular instruction to students in lieu of educators, and police officers should not have permanent office space in our schools. Many School Committee members expressed concern over the intimidation factor of armed, uniformed police officers permanently stationed in our school buildings.

In arriving at this recommendation, School Committee members convened multiple discussions with a myriad of stakeholders, including central office administrators, school principals, administrators, educators, guidance counselors, community leaders, elected officials, parents, students, law enforcement, and the School Resource Officers themselves. Stakeholders represented a diverse array of backgrounds, experiences, interests, and perspectives. We received input from individuals across the socioeconomic spectrum, many of whom identified as one or more of African-American/Black, Asian-American, Latinx, and/or White.

The format for community engagement included conversations, formal and informal, multiple rounds of public comment, as well as an anonymous survey taken by staff and more than 600 students. School Committee members reviewed the history of School Resource Officer programs (in Brookline, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and nationally), as well as scholarly research on the efficacy of SROs. While responses were mixed, with school leadership supporting elements of the SRO program, and students mostly either unaware of SROs or expressing concern, the School Committee applied considerable weight to student input.

Nearly all of the adult stakeholders, regardless of demographic or stance, agreed that the current School Resource Officers, as individuals, are good people, with positive intentions, whose commitment to our students and impactful contributions to many of their lives deserve recognition. The School Committee concurs with this assessment. One student shared during a public meeting how he personally benefitted from the relationship formed with his School Resource Officer. By recommending the ending of the SRO program, we do not seek to dismiss or otherwise minimize these reported positive experiences with specific SROs. Rather, we seek to examine the School Resource Officer program at a macro level through a systemic, structural framework decoupled from the individuals within that structure. People move in and out of positions; systems, unless changed, remain the same.

History of the SRO Program

In evaluating the efficacy of any system, one must first inquire as to its purpose, and then examine whether the structures within it are optimal for achieving that purpose. Although the Brookline Police Department and Public Schools of Brookline share a long history of partnership in very specific areas, such as the Legal Studies program of the 1980s, the DARE program of the 1990s, and the AWARE program of the 2000s, the School Resource Officer program itself only dates back to October of 2019. At that time, Interim Superintendent of the Public Schools of Brookline, Ben Lummis, and Interim Chief of the Brookline Police Department Andrew Lipson, entered into a Memorandum of Agreement along with the Norfolk County District Attorney's Office "...to facilitate a safe and secure environment for students, faculty, staff and the entire school community in the Town of Brookline." This Memorandum was executed without the knowledge or consultation of the School Committee.

The October 2019 MOA establishes that the Public Schools of Brookline, Brookline Police Department and Norfolk County District Attorney's Office will "coordinate their efforts and share information in order to prevent violence involving the students of the Public Schools of Brookline...prevent the use, abuse, and distribution of alcohol and other controlled substances...and to promote a safe and nurturing environment in the school community." The MOA explicitly reserves non-criminal disciplinary matters to school officials: "...it is the sole prerogative of school officials to impose discipline in accordance with the policies and procedures for infractions of school rules and policies not amounting to criminal or delinquent conduct." School Resource Officers serve as police liaisons "in order to facilitate prompt and clear communications between the school and police personnel." They "are considered a part of the Public Schools of Brookline District's 'Law Enforcement Unit'..." The Brookline Police Department, on its website, defines School Resource Officers as police officers who "work in collaboration with school administration to support students, ensure positive outcomes for youth, and connect the school, students, and families to services and resources in the community."

The October 2019 MOA that implemented the SRO program in Brookline was a delayed response to state legislation enacted in 2014 motivated by a spate of school shootings across the country. The 2014 statute, the Gun Violence Reduction Act¹, mandated that SROs be placed in all municipalities in the state where a school is located. Under legislation passed and signed into law in 2018, the state updated its requirements on the information that school districts provide in their Memorandum of Agreement with their local Police Department(s) regarding the scope of SRO roles and responsibilities. In September of 2018, the Massachusetts Attorney General issued a sample Memorandum of Agreement to be used as a template. Currently, the state does not require municipalities to retain SROs. Each city and town can decide for itself, subject to a request by the superintendent of schools.²

Community Input

The Public Schools of Brookline solicited various forms of community input to reach our recommendation. A major finding from these data points was the significant racial disparity in

¹ <https://malegislature.gov/laws/sessionlaws/acts/2014/chapter284>

² <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2020/Chapter253>

perceptions of safety and comfort in the SRO program. The remainder of this section details our community input.

Community conversation around the purposes of the SRO program primarily highlighted promotion of a safe, nurturing environment, social-emotional support for students, positive interactions with police officers, and diversion from criminal court. School Committee members received considerable anecdotal reports, in both directions, about the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the SRO program in achieving these objectives. In an effort to better quantify the positions of the most directly affected stakeholders, we surveyed staff and students in multiple choice and narrative response formats. The goal of the survey was not merely to determine where a majority of respondents landed on any one particular question, but to discern any patterns in the responses based on subgroupings by grade level, race, and stakeholder group (i.e. student or staff). Nearly everyone involved at any stage of this SRO program review, both in favor of the program and against, recognized the importance of applying these social and racial lenses as an acknowledgement of the disparate experiences of minorities in our community and throughout the nation. To strictly adhere to majoritarian numbers, in either direction, would by definition override and effectively suppress the voices of those in the minority. The School Committee strives to hear all voices.

The SRO survey was conducted over a 3-day span during the last week of May. Students in Grades 6-12, along with staff, received an opportunity to respond to the survey. More than 600 students participated, as did over 250 staff members. A small number of school building leaders provided narrative feedback.

The first question asked whether respondents knew that an SRO is a police officer. 70% of students responded that they did not know SROs are police officers, compared to 17% of staff. 30% of students reported that they knew their school had an SRO, compared to 66% of staff. Among those who reported awareness of SROs in their school buildings, only 15% of students strongly agreed that SRO presence made them feel safer (54% disagreed or strongly disagreed). By more than double (31%), staff respondents strongly agreed that students feel safer with SROs in the buildings. This suggests that adult perceptions of student feelings on safety with SROs do not align with actual student perceptions.

While a majority of students, irrespective of race, who knew about SROs in their school buildings disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel safer with SROs, the percentage of African-American/Black and Latinx students who disagreed or strongly disagreed was even greater: 66%. Only 3% of African-American/Black and Latinx students strongly agreed that SROs make them feel safer. Looking at Asian and White students only, 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed that SROs make them feel safer.

Middle schoolers responded quite differently than high schoolers. 72% of middle school students who knew about SROs in their school buildings (39 students) agreed or strongly agreed that SROs make them feel safer. Only 37% of high school students who knew about SROs in their school buildings (126 students) felt the same. This divide between middle school and high school also manifested itself in the results to a question about student comfort level with speaking to

SROs. 58% of middle schoolers agreed or strongly agreed with feeling comfortable talking to SROs, compared to 43% of high schoolers. Only 8% of middle schoolers said they strongly disagreed with feeling comfortable talking to SROs, while 36% of high schoolers strongly disagreed.

By race, not even one African-American/Black or Latinx student strongly agreed with feeling comfortable talking to SROs, while 58% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Among Asian and White students, a narrow majority (51%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with feeling comfortable talking to SROs.

These combined data points, though limited by sample size, at minimum suggest a need to deliberately rethink how the Town of Brookline, the Police Department, and the Public Schools of Brookline can best achieve the Police Department's worthy stated objective to "work in collaboration with school administration to support students, ensure positive outcomes for youth, and connect the school, students, and families to services and resources in the community." The fact that 70% of respondents did not know about the SRO program (or its affiliation with the Brookline Police Department) suggests limited efficacy based on numbers alone. A majority of high school students disagreeing that they feel safer around SROs, and disagreeing that they feel comfortable talking to SROs, concerns the School Committee. That these numbers are even more pronounced in our African-American/Black and Latinx student responses makes swift reform all the more important. We believe that the Public Schools of Brookline must create a climate and culture of physical and psychological safety for every student. Without feeling safe, students will not be able to grow and learn at their best.

Next Steps

The School Committee's recommendation to end the SRO program should not be construed as a desire to sever all relationships between the Public Schools of Brookline and the Brookline Police Department. Nor should this recommendation be interpreted as an indictment against any particular individual or School Resource Officer. The School Committee routinely reviews programs in all categories, whether academic, administrative, athletic, operational, or wellness-related. In reviewing such programs, we remind ourselves that we are not critiquing or evaluating the individuals involved, but rather the positions, structures, and systems in place. Even when one program ends, the individuals who held positions within that program sometimes remain involved under a different capacity better-suited for the needs of the district.

The Brookline Police Department and Public Schools of Brookline share a decades-long relationship that survives any one particular program. Termination of the DARE program in 2008 clearly did not mark the end of the schools' relationship with the police. Nor would termination of the SRO program. As it always remains the objective of the School Committee to promote the best interests of our school community, we want to carefully evaluate how to optimize the delivery of support services for our students, a subject for which we have devoted significant time and consideration to during the last year and a half in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The School Committee believes that a combination of educators, guidance counselors, mental health professionals, and public health experts would better serve many of the objectives

identified as purposes of the SRO program, albeit not necessarily to the exclusion of police officers and other professionals who could provide support as guest speakers and mentors upon student request.

Ending the SRO program requires additional process. The School Committee insists that any such proposal be comprehensive, well-articulated, and reflective of school leader input. Several school principals and other district leaders expressed support for the SRO program in testimony to the Select Board's Task Force, and in public meetings convened by the School Committee. Any new program that replaces the SRO program must identify a specific plan, timing, funding, and reallocation of resources to maintain and enhance student support. This summer, the School Committee would like the Public Schools of Brookline Administration to provide the following information to help plan the next phase of how services currently provided by SROs might be provided to students going forward: 1) a review of the roles that SROs play in the school buildings currently; 2) whether those roles need to be performed; 3) who would be best to carry out those roles based on skills and expertise required (e.g. guidance counselors, health educators, social workers, police officers, etc.); and 4) where funds would come from to fund those activities. We would like this to include input from principals and vice principals, senior staff, and the Brookline Police Department, as applicable. In the fall, we can discuss this approach with all public and community stakeholders.