

For SROs, Educators & Administrators

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LESSONS FROM THE FIELD:

How SRO Programs are Diverting Youth from the Juvenile Justice System

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A goal of present-day, school-based law enforcement efforts should be to “keep students in school and out of court.” Research points out that when a young person is involved in the juvenile justice system they are often negatively impacted by the experience. Such involvement interferes with a student’s education, raises the risk of harm to that young person, and increases the risk that they will become involved later in life in adult criminal behavior.

Effective SRO programs can be measured in a number of ways. One of those ways is looking at how well these school-law enforcement-community partnerships work together to DIVERT youth from involvement with the juvenile justice system. In the last issue of the *Journal of School Safety*, I outlined four things SRO programs could do to enhance their ability to keep students in school and out of justice involvement. In summary, the four questions to ask about your diversion efforts should include, “Has your school and law enforcement community defined the roles the SRO will play?”, “Was there a thorough process to choose the SRO?”, “Are the SROs well-trained?”, and “Does the school have strong and clear policies related to supportive school discipline and diversion?”

Lessons From The Field

What are some examples of how exemplary SRO programs

are using these four strategies for diversion? The following are real-life lessons from partnerships around the United States:

How Communities Define the Roles the SRO Plays Will Help Divert Youth

Law enforcement agencies and schools may define the roles SROs differently in different communities. This definition is determined by what the local community needs and wants. But the activities of each SRO are determined by some combination of the “triad” roles encompassing three primary functions: Educator; counselor/mentor; law enforcement problem solver. The way each of these roles is carried out has the potential to keep youth out of involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Adam Gongwer, seasoned SRO for the Ontario, OH schools, put it this way: “Under the counselor side of the triad model diversion strategies like peer mediation, restitution, and community service are preferred over citing into juvenile court unless it is an act of violence, or drug- or weapon-related.”

Diversion from juvenile justice was a defined, explicit role of the SRO, according to Dr. Joseph Christy, Former Director of Washington County Juvenile Department, Hillsboro, OR, who explains: “We never intended for arrests to occur, espe-

cially in some of the lower level offenses like possession of alcohol, minor theft or destruction of property, attendance problems, or normal adolescent conflict. This kind of behavior can usually be handled effectively by school administration through mediation, counseling, education, and disciplinary practices that balance accountability and respect without elevating it to a criminal violation.”

Typically, defining the roles of the SRO is the result of an interagency discussion. Ed Negron, former captain of the Milwaukee, WI Police Department, and now in charge of that city’s SRO program, explains how the roles of the SRO were discussed between the superintendent and chief of police: “It was agreed that many matters that SROs are called to address and end up in citations or arrests could be handled at the school level.” This discussion reflects the clarification that school discipline was not the role of the SRO.

The roles of the SRO sometimes evolve with the community’s understanding of how to best achieve community safety. For example, James Franco, former SRO and now Director of Operations at the Utica, NY Safe Schools/Healthy Students Partnership, Inc. explains that: “We began to give great thought to the roles of the SRO and how they could actively divert youth from the juvenile justice system when we began to implement the Arrest Diversion Program in our schools in 2010. The program has our SROs acting as front-line personnel actively looking for appropriate cases for diversion. The SROs are critical partners and have seen the results of their diversion efforts over the past 5 years. They believe in the concept; almost all of our diversion cases are generated by their actions.”

How School-Law Enforcement Partnerships Choose SROs Who Will Divert Youth

One of the most important ingredients of a successful SRO program is choosing the right officer. The question communities should ask is, “When your school-community goes through the process to choose the SRO, is the concept of diversion included?”

James Franco recalls that, “Since 2010 the concept of diversion has been used explicitly in the process of choosing SROs. A great deal of thought is given to selecting officers with the right temperament, training, and outlook as SROs, and this includes their belief and understanding of diversion.”

SROs are chosen in a variety of ways that may include: Interviews with school administrators, the current SRO, and law enforcement commanders—who have the final decision in who is assigned as SRO. Localities can make sure that there is community input in the process, which may include review of the position by the school board, parents, and service providers such as behavioral health professionals (who are key personnel to whom an SRO can refer a student).

Choosing the right officer is easier when there is a bigger pool from which to choose. Here’s how one community expanded that pool. The Milwaukee Police Department changed its SRO program so that officers work on an early power shift (11am to 7pm), which helps to cover school dismissals and after-school events without spending more money than necessary. This change had the added benefit of opening the door so that night shift officers could apply for the SRO position without violating the police union’s contract.

Is the topic of diversion part of the interview process when a potential SRO is being interviewed?

One SRO explained that sometimes the question may come up, but there may not be a written policy about diversion. While

no one asked him during the interview process about situations where he might divert a student, rather than arrest him, it was probably because those interviewing didn’t know to ask. The experience in this community raises the point that those doing the choosing may need to consider posing scenario-based questions that reveal a potential SROs disposition and skills for keeping students in school.

How SROs are Trained to Divert Youth

Today’s SRO must receive on-going training in many different areas. But how are SROs trained for diversion?

More and more SRO programs are training officers in policies and tactics that are aimed at keeping youth in school and out of court. These trainings supplement what all sworn officers are required to take to carry out their law enforcement job, and teach knowledge and skills that officers need to deal with the youth population in a school setting. This special training provides what SRO supervisor Ed Negron calls, “Training that assists the officers to better understand what is going on with students, and how they might respond appropriately.” SROs are trained how to respond to situations where students break school rules by making sure the students are referred to school administrators, not to juvenile court.

Sources of training vary widely and include: Police academies, peace officer training councils, SRO conferences, and online courses. Because of the special nature of the topics SROs need, many pertinent trainings are offered by community agencies, such as mental health providers. Training that supports the SROs role in diverting youth from justice involvement includes a wide variety of topics, including:

- Mental health first aid or crisis intervention
- Adolescent brain development
- De-escalating potential situations
- Positive school discipline
- Cultural diversity
- Constructive ways to handle stressful situations for both staff and youth
- Reducing potential and actual injury to children and staff
- Dealing with suicide
- Cyberbullying
- RX drug abuse
- School safety and violence
- Positive Behavior Intervention Supports

How School-Law Enforcement Partnerships Use Policy to Help Divert

Policy is another powerful strategy that can be used to enhance the diversion role of SROs. Schools and law enforcement agencies can develop stated policies that help lessen involvement of youth in the justice system. Two policy areas should be clear: One is around school discipline; the other is a clear statement about the diversion role of SROs.

Some SRO Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) have clear statements that articulate how the SRO relates to school discipline. James Franco points out that Utica’s policy is “designed at reducing the potential “school-to-prison pipeline, not at enhancing it.” As SRO Adam Gongwer put it, “Our MOU clearly states that the school deals with discipline exclusively. Criminal mat-



ters are then reviewed by the SRO to determine the best course of action for both victim and suspect.”

Policy and training go hand-in-hand. Some agencies and schools make sure that SROs are trained to implement the school discipline policy so SROs view themselves as assisting school administrators (who will handle the school related discipline issues), rather than using a "hook 'em and book 'em" approach carried out by the officer. As Franco puts it: “The SRO views the incident primarily as a law enforcement action only when an event is overtly illegal in nature. And even then they are actively looking to divert those cases that are appropriate.”

Collaboration With the Broader Community—A Key Essential to Diversion

Defining roles of the SRO, choosing the officer, training, and policy—all of these need to be seen in the context of partnership with the broader community. A critical ingredient to an effective diversion effort is strong team collaboration with other partners, including mental health counselor, juvenile justice professionals, school representatives and others.

Dr. Christy explains how the community fits in: “The goal was always for the first course action to be intervention from a TEAM consisting of the SRO, a mental health counselor, a juvenile justice professional, and a school representative. The team had broad discretion to engage parents, provide direction, impose appropriate discipline, refer to the right community services. Of course, in cases of more serious offenses or failure of initial interventions, referral to juvenile justice was still available as a course of action, but always as a last resort.”

Conclusion

School-based law enforcement partnerships around the country are taking important steps to help divert students from involvement with the justice system—clarifying the roles of the SRO, choosing the right officer, training for diversion, and using policy. When law enforcement works with schools to divert students FROM involvement with the justice system, the broader community needs to help by providing the alternatives TO which students can be referred to hold our young people accountable and provide them needed supports.

