

For SROs, Educators & Administrators

Winter 2016

THE JOURNAL OF SCHOOL SAFETY[®]

The Official Publication of the National Association of School Resource Officers





Action Steps to Strengthen

Your School-Law Enforcement Partnership

By John Rosiak, Principal, Prevention Partnerships, Rosiak Associates, LLC

It is not uncommon for school personnel to be confused about the roles School Resource Officers (SROs) can play in making schools safer. It is important that school administrators, school security, and the rest of the school staff be “on the same page” as their SROs. This article outlines the essential action steps that SRO programs can take to help clarify the roles of SROs and school partners in building stronger relationships that result in keeping students in school and out of justice involvement.

What are the important action steps SRO programs can take to strengthen the school-law enforcement partnership?

Identify Problems/Challenges

First, it's important for SRO programs to understand what the safety-related problems are in their school-community. To better understand these problems, talk to a variety of stakeholders in the community, including school board members, police officials, school administrators and staff, students, and parents. These stakeholders can provide valuable insights into local problems, and make suggestions as well. Make sure you look at relevant data, such as school crime and related problems. Examine

trends on “school exclusion,” meaning suspension and expulsion and any arrest data and referrals to court.

Clarify Roles

Well-trained SROs understand the “triad” roles they carry out: Educator; informal counselor/mentor; and law enforcer. It is critically important that everyone else in the school-law enforcement partnership understands the roles of the SRO, which also include being the resource for school safety and crime prevention, liaisons to law enforcement and other first responders, supporters of district employees and students, and relationship creators. When I train, I like to ask participants, “What is the ‘R’ in SRO?” and probe the different ways SROs can be a resource and to whom, just to reinforce that “resource” is the backbone of the SRO's responsibilities.

Veteran SRO Adam Gongwer, working in the Ontario, OH schools, points out how one critical “resource” role is carried out when the SRO leads the school safety team in creating, adapting, and updating emergency operations plans that must be approved by the school district. Clarifying the SRO and school administration roles is especially critical; having well-defined threat assessment

team protocols and monthly drills can serve to make clear how law enforcement and school administration complement each other.

A valuable step SROs can take to clarify for everyone in the community the roles SROs carry out is to highlight these functions in publications, websites, meetings, and conference/trainings. At the same time, the complementary roles of school administrators and school security can be spelled out.

Develop/Refine Your MOU

Try this exercise: On the spot, ask someone on your school-law enforcement partnership to deliver an “elevator speech” describing what is in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the law enforcement agency and school district. Some can do it. But many partners do not know what is in their agreement. Occasionally, some districts may not even have a proper MOU, although they probably have a “contract” that outlines the business arrangement between the law enforcement agency and the school district.

Encourage your team to:

- Identify if they have an MOU.
- Distribute the MOU to all relevant partners so they know what the contents are.
- Periodically review as a group the content of the MOU. This review can be conducted by comparing the existing agreement with the components of an MOU that are identified in the *Journal of School Safety* article (Winter 2014) “Governing Your SRO Program.”

Choose the Right SRO

School and law enforcement leaders should examine how SROs are recruited and selected. These leaders can ask their partners to be a part of the process they use in choosing their SROs. Here is a list of steps the law enforcement agencies—in partnership with others in the school-community—can consider in the process of choosing the SRO:

- 1 Obtain support/buy-in from the school district and law enforcement agency.
- 2 Post the SRO position announcement, listing the job requirements.
- 3 Work collaboratively to develop interview questions.
- 4 Receive applications and conduct interviews.
- 5 Law enforcement agency decides on candidate.

Train the SRO and School Staff

Teams should examine the training needed and received by SROs, and other members of the school-law enforcement partnership. Teams can generate a list of training topics they want to address, and identify where SROs and other team members (ideally through “cross training”) can obtain that training. Additional training topics and sources of training should be added by the district teams in an ongoing-fashion.

Engage the Broader Community

The school-law enforcement partnership effort is not complete without engaging partners from the broader community. These partners include: Agencies that are public and private, such as health, mental health, juvenile justice, social services, etc.; private groups, such as civic, faith-based, and corporate

partners; and individuals, such as mentors, subject matter experts, and volunteers.

Teams can conduct a “Resource Mapping” exercise that reviews whether their community has access to the resources in place to match problems their youth may face. Such an exercise, if carried out effectively, can uncover what programs exist to match the problems faced by youth. This process can also identify duplication in some areas, and need in other areas.

Communicate to Improve Relations

Communications and relationships go hand-in-hand. When Sgt. Dave Osterquist, SRO supervisor and NASRO trainer, provides workshops he focuses on the three “C”s for building effective relationships: Communication, Consistency and Commitment. These are supported by the underlying concepts of proximity (to facilitate easier joint efforts) and respect (which is essential for positive working relations).

SROs and school administrators can use different methods of communications, such as using technology, traditional mechanisms like paper, and face-to-face interactions. Communications operates on a number of levels, including: 1) Between SROs and school administrators; and 2) the school-law enforcement partnership communicating its activities/needs to the broader community.

Use Case Studies to Strengthen Your Strategies

Teams can clarify and strengthen their partnership through the use of case study scenarios. Start by assembling a collection of case studies that district teams are likely to encounter. These case scenarios can be presented in a problem-solving or tabletop format where teams work individually and together as a community of practice to learn how to best address such cases. Cases can be organized in a number of ways, such as by issues that students and their families face (alcohol, drugs, suicide, trafficking, gangs, violence, weapons, etc.) or topics that teams need to address (hiring the SRO, training, MOUs, working with community partners, communications problems, etc.)

Commit to Action

To fully realize their potential, school-law enforcement teams need to commit to further developing their school-law enforcement experience by working as district teams to construct SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) action plans. These plans should be living documents that are implemented by individual partners, and by partners working together. “Going public,” that is, sharing plans with others, aids in a team’s sense of accountability to carry out their plans.

Conclusion

It is not unusual to face resistance from some partners who are reluctant to fully engage in this cross-sector team process. But, by working together on the action steps defined above, SROs, school administrators and staff, and other community partners can strengthen their school-law enforcement partnership.

John Rosiak uses the action steps described above when training school-law enforcement partnerships. He has worked with SROs since the mid-1980s. Please share your strategies on how to strengthen the school-law enforcement partnership with john@rosiakassociates.com.

