



SRO Work Group RECOMMENDATION REPORT



Arlington
Public
Schools

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SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The School Resource Officer (SRO) Work Group was divided into four subgroups and a Youth Advisory Council consisting of APS students. Representatives of the youth advisory council participated with each subgroup. Each of the four sub-groups considered the appropriate roles for law enforcement in APS schools and if SROs are the correct mechanisms to achieve those roles. The description of the scope of each group is below followed by the specific recommendations from that group.

The primary recommendation from the SRO Work Group is that SROs should not have permanent offices or a daily onsite presence in the schools. The majority of the group believes the Arlington County Police Department (ACPD) can provide the necessary law enforcement related functions to APS without having officers stationed in schools. However, state law independently requires APS to include ACPD as part of its Threat Assessment Team, Safety Audit Committee, Emergency Procedures Review, and Physical Security Assessment, without SROs being assigned to schools.

This would require revision to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to change the structure of the relationships between APS and ACPD. There are specific revisions the group is recommending:

- Revision of the roles of ACPD in the schools to emphasize functions that can only be performed by law enforcement. Several of the subgroups noted the SROs as capable, willing adults in schools who are taking on a variety of roles that do not specifically require a law enforcement officer to handle.
- The subgroups are recommending that where a law enforcement office is not required, APS invest in additional staff, training, and support for other professional staff to meet those needs.
- Focus in the MOU on functions that have mandatory reporting requirements or mandated collaboration on security functions between APS and ACPD.

- Continued participation of ACPD members as coaches, mentors or in informal roles- as appropriate for any member of the community to participate in the support of the development of APS students, without specific access or engagement because of a role as an SRO.
- Consideration of measurable goals for the collaboration and a process to review results related to those goals.

The work group has also identified recommendations that fall outside the specific scope of the MOU between APS and ACPD:

- Additional staff training to ensure consistency in how discipline processes are handled and when law enforcement officers are called to support school staff.
- Investment in additional professional support staff to bring ratios to recommended minimums in mental health and substance abuse areas.
- Prioritize implementation of a robust school-based restorative justice program.
- Implementation of a rigorous education plan for students and families on law enforcement and the legal system's interactions and rights, presented at various touch points along the K-12 pathway, and that APS should partner with criminal defense attorneys and/or other juvenile justice providers in this effort.
- Clear delineation in the MOU and reinforcement through staff training of how information about police involved incidents that impact APS students is transmitted to the appropriate school staff needed to support students with wraparound services. This training should be for APS Administrators and ACPD about state privacy laws and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) privacy regarding sharing of information occurring outside of school.

The subgroup recommendations also include some detailed suggestions for how an offsite/on-call SRO or juvenile response unit might be structured.

SUBGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Subgroup Definitions

Education and Mentorship – This subgroup focused on the role of APS staff and ACPD officers in educating students on federal, state, and local laws and the criminal justice system, student rights when interacting with law enforcement, restorative practices, alcohol and substance abuse, internet safety, social media, and bullying. The subgroup also reviewed ACPD officers’ role and volunteer effort as mentors in community, school, and athletic programs.

Law Enforcement - This subgroup will look at the role of APS staff and ACPD in ensuring laws are enforced in and around Arlington Public Schools. The group will look at staff responsibilities and ACPD / SRO responsibilities. The group will review current practices and laws related to law enforcement in schools. Recent legislative changes will be reviewed and considered. Consider effects on youth of law enforcement actions and consequences in educational settings versus noneducational settings and study school to prison pipelines, compare regional and state practices and effects of law enforcement in schools to current practices and effects in Arlington.

Mental Health, Behavior and Substance Abuse – This subgroup reviewed the role of APS staff and ACPD in addressing behavioral, mental health and substance abuse issues among students. The group also reviewed current practices within Arlington County, the programs in place, and the law governing these issues. The effects of disparate policing practices on youth mental health and disparities in legal consequences from youth interaction with law enforcement in and out of schools was another focus of this subgroup. Lastly, the subgroup reviewed best practices in police and youth relationships in supporting positive behaviors, mental health and managing youth substance abuse.

Physical Security including Emergency Response – This subgroup reviewed the Virginia and Arlington requirements related to the physical security of schools and their property and the relationship between ACPD and APS in ensuring appropriate security is maintained. The group also reviewed the

relationship between APS and ACPD as it relates to emergency situations and response. In addition, the subgroup reviewed response time rates nationally and regionally; school systems with SROs and school systems without them; school incidents nationwide; and the roles of police departments and police and staff roles in managing school safety during emergency incidents.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Subgroup

Primary Recommendation

The majority opinion is that while there may be a role for School Resource Officers (SROs) or the police department in schools, that role does not include SROs in secondary schools as a security or law enforcement presence. APS and ACPD should have a formal relationship governed by an agreement, or memorandum of understanding (MOU), that fully defines the roles that ACPD will perform specifically for APS. That role should not include a routine onsite daily presence in secondary schools as a security force and should not include any regular involvement in school discipline. One member of the group believes that rather than remove SROs from the schools, ACPD should invest in more robust training for SROs, especially in the area of mental health and interacting with students who have disabilities.

Formation of a Juvenile Response Group

The members of this group unanimously recommended that ACPD revamp the SRO program into a Juvenile Response Group that is on call for juvenile offender incidents throughout the county. The response group would be specifically trained in child development and trauma-informed responses, de-escalation with regards to juveniles, the specific mental state involved with juvenile activity, and potential juvenile criminal activity. This response group would also be able to be called upon first if there were any security incidents at school involving students in case it would be necessary to obtain law enforcement assistance. A Juvenile Response Group would be available to provide security at large school events, work with APS for career day situations, mentorship roles with respect to clubs, after-school

activities, and the type of programs that are provided in some of the APS elementary schools.

The majority of the group would like to see a relationship-building model focused on mentorship rather than enforcement and arrests with students and the community. The group members recommend that ACPD use the Juvenile Response Group to expand focus on a community liaison approach, much in the same way Arlington used to have a community policing model in the mid-1990s to 2000. That way there would be a continued relationship developed in the communities around the schools that would bolster connection as ACPD officers change assignments over time. The group believes, however, that any program must be developed with the approval and collaboration of the target communities, be aligned with leading practices from successful programs, and not result in heavy police presences in minority communities. The program must have clear and measurable goals and objectives that will be used with the regular review of arrest data and civilian reports to ensure that the program is working as intended. This group believes that any community-based policing program should not result in the maintenance or increase in the number of minority children exposed to the criminal justice system, which was disproportionate, even during the aforementioned time period.

School Discipline and Training

While the majority recommend that SROs should no longer continue to have a consistent on-campus presence, there is a gap created by their removal. Schools will require staff to take training and provide the tools to fulfill some of the functions that have been, at times and often incorrectly, perceived to be the role of SROs in APS.

APS administration across the school division and applicable staff require training on how to lead in a crisis. From the information provided, some APS administrators have leaned too heavily on in-building SROs beyond the MOU in the areas of discipline, crises, and other school incidents, regardless of whether a security threat and/or a reportable offense exists. From the research we have done in the Mental Health and Substance Abuse subgroup, the majority of the members believe SROs do not need to be in secondary schools

full-time. One member has consistently expressed that if ACPD will fund SROs in schools, we should retain them in the schools with additional training. The majority of the group recommends that police officers should only be in the buildings to comply with state-mandated public safety roles and for co-taught courses. The MOU, which provides guidance for the relationship between APS and ACPD, must be updated to define the extent of their roles and responsibilities as discussed above.

Improve the Ratio of School Counseling and Mental Health Staff to Students

For several years, the School Board and the Superintendent have discussed, but failed to bring the ratio of counseling staff to students to within recommended, nationally recognized ranges. There is substantial evidence of increased student struggles with distance learning, social isolation, and instability at home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased mental health issues have been evident and growing even before the pandemic, and documented by surveys such as the annual Youth Risk Behavior Surveys conducted by the Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families in conjunction with the CDC. If ever there was a need to address the growing mental health crisis with our youth, it is now as we emerge from the pandemic and schools reopen.

The ratio of counseling and mental health staff (social workers, psychologists, and counselors) is well below the ratios recommended by the Commonwealth of Virginia and the respective professional associations. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia recommends the following ratios for school counselors: 1:350 counselor-to-student ratio for grades K–8 and a 1:250 ratio for grades 9–12. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of not more than 1:250. Currently, the APS ratio is 1:600.

Our group also recommends increasing the number of Substance Abuse Counselors as those ratios are well below the needs of our student populations. Evidence-based early interventions can improve outcomes and remove barriers to success for many students and significantly reduce incidents with APS discipline and APD. This model could include referrals out to parents and students through private

insurance treatment and/or Arlington-based programs for follow-up and treatment plans.

Additional behavior specialists are also needed in APS:

1. Conduct behavioral assessments on a larger number of students as needed; and
2. With the staff, parent, and student on evidence-based approaches resulting in plans suitable for the students with disabilities or mental health diagnoses.

More behavioral specialists are also needed across the system - currently there are four behavioral specialists serving 28,000+ students.

Generally, school staff may require additional training to supplement the counseling staff. APS should evaluate the current crisis prevention training given to staff, expand the training to include all staff that are interested, and potentially provide additional training to a handful of staff that are more likely to engage in crisis behavior. Each school site should have a "crisis management team" that can train together and practice different scenarios.

This group recognizes that increasing school counseling staff is an expensive proposition, and salaries make up nearly 80% of the school division's budget. This recommendation requires the support of all members of our community to provide students with early intervention to avoid crises. Notably, there is a large, community-based organization in Arlington that could be an effective and critical partner with APS, but has so far refused to provide meaningful mental health services for children in our community, and this group calls on the Virginia Hospital Center to step up and provision appropriate interventions for Arlingtonians 18 and under. If VHC is unable to provide the services themselves, they should create a fund to pay for trained, competent contract mental health and substance abuse counseling staff at our schools to supplement the staff and reduce the ratio of mental health counselors, social workers, and psychologists to students in our schools.

Restorative Justice

APS administration must fully commit to developing a robust restorative justice program for APS to help address long-term discipline disparities. This will

require prioritized dedication to engage administrators and school staff in the development of restorative justice circles in the various school communities. Restorative justice circles are the core structure to foster healing and safety in the school communities. A restorative justice approach will seek to deepen communication amongst people to cultivate empathy, trust, and mutual respect where all parties acknowledge harms, and take accountability for harms, and make a plan to prevent those harms in the future. The restorative justice program will also need to be consistently implemented across schools with the goals of holding persons accountable for harms without stigma, trauma and marginalization associated with other more traditional discipline models and legal constructs. It is our understanding based on interviews with Restorative Arlington staff that implementation of this program could take a number of years as facilitators are hired and trained, especially since the current staff expertise focuses on implementation in the criminal justice arena and not education. It may be necessary for Restorative Arlington to hire staff with expertise in implementing restorative practices in educational settings to ensure the development or adoption of an appropriate curriculum, policies and procedures within appropriate timeframes.

Education and Mentorship Subgroup

The primary focus of the Education and Mentorship subgroup was to review the role SROs should play in APS' mission to educate students and families on federal, state, and local laws and our criminal justice system, alcohol and substance abuse, internet safety, social media, and bullying. The subgroup has also reviewed ACPD's role and volunteer effort as mentors within the schools. Regarding education and mentorship, it is clear that the primary relationship between APS and ACPD should be one of support. This means two things at the outset. First, SROs are not required to be stationed within APS schools in order to fulfill any education or mentorship functions. Secondly, all of the education and mentorship functions at issue can and should be undertaken by professional educators and APS staff.

While SROs are undoubtedly familiar with matters such as substance abuse and internet safety, they are not trained educators. They also do not specialize in matters of child or adolescent development, child psychology, positive youth development, the impact of trauma and toxic stress on children and adolescents, manifestations of behavioral health in children, and disabilities that affect behavior. We have concluded that – because of these important complexities concerning children – it is the educators, rather than SROs, who should carry the responsibility of these necessary roles of education and mentorship within the schools. APS is fortunate to be well-equipped with teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrators who have spent their careers specializing in working with children. These professionals understand childhood development, mentorship, and the various needs of the students under their tutelage. It stands to follow that the folks best situated to teach our young children are the same professional educators who work with them every day. If an individual teacher wishes to utilize a member of ACPD to speak to classes about how the law and law enforcement pertains to a specific subject, then that individual teacher can make those arrangements, as with any other guest speaker from an educational perspective.

While this subgroup did not reach a unanimous consensus on our recommendation, an 80% majority opined that SROs should not remain as a fixture within the schools. Of the 10 individuals appointed to this subgroup, 80% (8 people) agree that SROs are not needed in our schools, and 20% (two people) believe that SROs should remain in schools.

The two subgroup members who voiced support for keeping SROs stationed in schools expressed a desire to define and standardize the connections between SROs and APS curriculum in health, social studies, and driver's education. These members also mentioned that having SROs in schools allows the SROs to have casual interactions and build positive relationships with youth. It was also suggested that perhaps the after-school hours of 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. may be better opportunities for utilizing possible SRO connections and relationships with students, than during the normal school day under the current practice. Finally, these two members spoke more

broadly about improving the SRO-APS relationship. They recommended requiring SROs to create SMART goals every year and allowing PTAs to take part in the SRO selection process.

The overwhelming majority of this subgroup – which has reached a conclusion in favor of removing SROs from any permanent place within APS schools – relies on several rationales for its conclusion. These include: SROs are simply not necessary for contributing to education and mentorship of students and families; the fear and trauma that an SRO presence causes for many students and families; the acknowledgment of the disproportionate impact SROs have had on many Black, Brown, and students with disabilities; a desire to switch to a community resource officer model; and the opinion that educative and mentorship services are best provided by trained educators, counselors, and social workers. After assessing multiple presentations from various community groups and analyzing a substantial amount of information that has been provided to us, we have identified no need for SROs in the schools for purposes of education and the mentorship of students and families. We have seen no data or metrics that support the need for SROs to serve any educational or mentorship function within our schools. Neither have we seen compelling evidence suggesting that a continued SRO mentorship presence, which may benefit some students, would outweigh the substantial risk of psychological detriment to those other students who have expressed concerns and trauma-related responses (including, but certainly not limited to, those who experience race-based trauma that is triggered by a law enforcement presence). We note the well-established principle that in accepting our children within its walls, the schools take on the important legal role of acting in loco parentis (that is, “in the place of the parents”) during those important hours of the day. So, the question then becomes, “do we as parents, wish to invite armed law enforcement officers into our own homes for the purpose of helping us to raise our children?” We do not.

Lastly, this subgroup is deeply troubled by the fact that APS does not appear to have a targeted approach to educating students and families on their rights, responsibilities, and consequences when it comes to police interactions. This must be

addressed. We recommend, in the strongest terms possible, that APS establish a clearly-defined, rigorous student and family education plan, that will provide appropriate student and family education on these issues at multiple and specific touch points along the K-12 timeline. And a specific priority should be made to ensure that economically disadvantaged students and families are provided with this education. Some members of this subgroup recommended that, among other things, APS partner with defense attorneys and/or other juvenile justice providers to participate in educating students and families on legal issues.

School Functions Law Enforcement Should Fulfill

We did not identify any functions within the limited scope of our requested work that require law enforcement participation. That is, from an education and mentorship perspective, there is no SRO role that we identified, which APS teachers, counselors, administrators, and social workers cannot fulfill. We do not see, from an education and mentorship perspective, any of the possible benefits of SROs outweighing the potential for psychological and other harm for some students. Moving forward, we expect – in the event SROs are removed, as is being recommended – that Arlington County will continue its commitment to prioritizing the health and safety of its students, by focusing on other resources to support our students.

To be clear, this subgroup’s conclusions should *not* be interpreted, in any way, as an indictment on ACPD, or on their SROs. We have generally found that, by and large, the ACPD personnel and SROs are professional and courteous, with good hearts and positive intentions; rather, this subgroup’s findings are based on the scope of its work and the limited questions it has been asked to answer. The authentic fears that law enforcement presence creates for many students and families, are as equally real as the good intentions of SROs. Indeed, the best of intentions *and* a risk of psychological trauma are not mutually exclusive and can coexist.

Physical Security Subgroup

The Physical Security subgroup was divided on whether to keep SROs in schools or not. The subgroup believed that ACPD could still provide adequate support to students and schools, even if they are not stationed in the schools. For example, ACPD is required by the State to be part of the threat assessment team, even if they are not in the building. The police also communicate dangerous community situations and provide guidance on how to secure the building.

The Physical Security subgroup believed that law enforcement can continue to support schools as a consult for Safety and Physical security related issues such as:

- Community threats
- Securing the Grounds
- Active Shooters
- Safety Drills

Even though SROs are being recommended to support schools in these roles, these roles are able to be performed outside of the school building and do not require SROs to have a presence within school buildings.

Additional considerations on the role of SROS:

- APS is required by statute to designate liaisons to consult on the physical security of school buildings.
- ACPD could train staff on threat assessments, trafficking, etc.
- ACPD could designate cruisers to patrol the grounds and perimeter of school facilities during high traffic times and/or special events.
- ACPD could also designate rapid response teams for each school and conduct drills to prepare for emergencies.
- ACPD should provide APS with the number of minutes it takes to respond to each school once called because data was not available on response times.
- The ACPD Chief of Police and APS Superintendent could have monthly check-in meetings to discuss any unique needs that APS has vis-a-vis law enforcement, and to maintain a strong relationship.

Law Enforcement Subgroup

The Law Enforcement subgroup will review the role of APS staff and ACPD in ensuring laws are enforced in and around Arlington Public Schools. The subgroup will also review APS staff responsibilities and the responsibilities of SROs. Although tempted to consider how SROs are able to assist with counseling and mentoring, these topics were not reviewed by this subgroup because other subgroups would provide recommendations on these topics. The primary focus of the subgroup was on ACPD enforcing laws broken in school, giving particular weight to the offenses that are required to be [referred to law enforcement](#) (Referred to Law Enforcement (RLE) offenses include assault with weapon, terrorist threat, sexual assault, and drug distribution; the list was narrowed starting in 2020).

Structure of the SRO Program

The primary relationship should be support. ACPD should provide APS with support when needed to keep students and staff safe and enforce the law. A full-time ACPD presence on school campuses is not needed to achieve this goal.

ACPD should be available when called upon, like for any other place in the county. The rare and obvious times for calls would be active shooters, offenses required to be referred to law enforcement or any other serious crime or threat. By definition and agreement, SROs are not needed for regular misbehavior or school discipline. Other school events do not require a permanent presence either.

ACPD can be invited for educational presentations and community building activities. ACPD might also be able to provide training on de-escalation, crowd management or other matters that administration might find useful, but highly visible, full-time exhibition is not needed.

Community opinions are split on law enforcement, with as much negative as positive. Some people feel safer with law enforcement present – but some people feel quite the opposite. Typical was a questionnaire by the Arlington Schools Hispanic Parent Association (ASHPA) which found that barely half (56%) of people think SROs help students, with the other half evenly split between “somewhat” and “no.” Similarly, among the half of the participants

who reported interactions with SROs, the experience was evenly split between “supported” and “harassed.” The Arlington Branch of the NAACP was far less ambiguous. “Police officers do not belong in APS Schools,” they said in a letter to the School Board on September 3, 2020. It seems more than disrespectful to ignore that level of clarity when the level of affirmation is modest and any benefit is unclear.

However, this is not to suggest that SROs are useless. The presentation by [APS Administrators](#) on March 18, 2021 indicated administrator support for having SROs in schools – but the appreciation appeared to be for having capable and willing adults on hand, not someone carrying a gun and empowered to arrest. Similarly, the functions SROs currently play relating to counseling, coaching, and mentoring do not require law enforcement and might be better served by people with different training who present themselves differently on campus. The goal is not to disregard anyone’s needs, but to find other ways to serve them.

The community listening sessions pointed in the same direction. Affirmation for SROs seemed principally based on personal support that SROs are nice folks doing good work, and always willing to lend a hand. The subgroup does not claim otherwise. The question is whether the nice folks doing good work need a badge and a gun – or whether different people with different training could lend that hand, and whether the simple presence of the badge and the gun has a deleterious effect. Some people have made it clear such a presence does.

APS should be guided by its own mission statement: “To ensure all students learn and thrive in safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments.” APS is not a law enforcement agency. The educational mission is not advanced, and for many students, it is disturbed by a permanent uniformed presence.

As previously mentioned, the subgroup thinks law enforcement functions can be met on call as needed, but not on a permanent basis. Hopefully, ACPD will maintain a cadre of officers with a focus on juveniles, perhaps former SROs or people with additional training for handling youth. Regular patrols may include schools or grounds, or officers may choose

to work part-time as coaches and so forth, or contribute to restorative justice programs.

Any future MOU needs to make clear *where and when* ACPD has jurisdiction during their regular duties. For example, will warrants be served at the school for an activity that occurred off school grounds? Can ACPD ask for APS support in ongoing investigations that involve a student? If so, would parents need to be notified or informed of their rights?

Subgroup Suggested Solutions

The perfect solution would be for Arlington County to redirect most or all of the funds presently allocated for SROs to APS to perform functions currently done by SROs that are unrelated to law enforcement. SROs have discussed they do mentoring, drug counseling and various levels of social work. Those functions should be performed by people trained for them. To the degree APS administrators use SROs to support school administration, schools may benefit from additional senior personnel nearby or additional professional development for current staff. Funds should be allocated accordingly.

Funds are obviously not infinite and ACPD may need resources to maintain a cadre of officers with special training – but funds should be allocated to support necessary functions. The SRO budget could buy a lot of restorative justice, targeted crime prevention for individual youth, and additional administrative support.