Columbia Heights Police Department

Evaluation of the School Resource Program

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative analysis of the Columbia Heights School Resource Officer (SRO) program, which is a collaboration between Columbia Heights Public Schools (CHPS) and the Columbia Heights Police Department (CHPD). The CHPD views the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of performance, as well as the application of industry best practices as key components to an effective system. As such, the CHPD conducted a review of the SRO program during the spring and summer of 2016.

Introduction

The history of police in schools can be traced back to at least the 1950's when Flint, Michigan became one of the first schools in the country to assign a full-time police officer to a school. In later years, the term "School Resource Officer" would be applied in reference to a full-time law enforcement officer, with arrest powers, who was assigned to a school as a collaboration between the two (McDaniel, 2001). By the mid 1990's, there was a large increase in the numbers of school resource officers assigned to schools. McDaniel believed this to be a result of the Community Oriented Policing (COP) initiatives that were taking place across the country at the time. Others believe it was a result of increased funding from the federal government (Brady et al, 2007). Numbers from 2007 indicate there are approximately 19,000 full-time SRO officers across the United States (Hurley Swayze & Buskovik, 2014).

This prevalence of SROs in schools has not resulted in a blanket acceptance of the programs. One does not have to look far today to find a concern or controversy surrounding an officer assigned to a role in a school. A phrase that has now gained traction is the "school-to-prison pipeline" that detractors say leads to increased criminality as a result of the presence of a full-time officer in schools (Hurley Swayze, 2014).

There has been no shortage of attempts to study the effectiveness of SRO programs across the country. However, this topic has proved difficult to measure and the results are based mostly on the perceptions of either law enforcement or the administrators they work with. This being said, there has been some consensus on behaviors, traits, and best practices that can be applied to increase program success.

Background

The City of Columbia Heights is a medium-sized, first-ring suburb of Minneapolis that is significantly more diverse and less affluent than the state of Minnesota as a whole. The city is served by Columbia Heights Public Schools, Independent School District #13, and includes two public elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. The district has a third elementary school located just across the border in the city of Fridley, but whose students are primarily from Columbia Heights. At the request of the school district, the Columbia Heights Police Department teaches Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) at all three district schools. There are a total of 38 different languages spoken in the school district, approximately 76% of the students are children of color, and approximately 79% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced priced lunch.

Columbia Heights currently has two full-time officers that are assigned to a school as their primary job assignment while school is in session. The process Columbia Heights has used for selecting an SRO is for officers to submit a letter of interest when an opening arises. Those officers are then interviewed by members from the school district along with managers from the police department and a recommendation is made. The Chief of Police retains sole discretion for final selection of the officer assigned to the school district. The assignment can be lengthened or shortened at the discretion of the Chief of Police, in consultation with the school district, but generally starts at 3 years.

The specific roles are defined for the SRO by the administrator of the high school or middle school where the officer is assigned. Input is received both from the district level of the school system as well as from police administration. Training, supervision, and oversight remain the role of the police department, with input from officials with CHPS.

The scope of this review was not to assess the performance of SRO programs outside of the Columbia Heights school district, nor was this an extensive analysis from the standpoint of the SRO; a study was recently conducted by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety which this review will reference. Rather, the purpose of this review is to analyze the current practices of the Columbia Heights Police Department as it applies to the SRO assignments in the Columbia Heights Public Schools.

Literature Review

The Role of the SRO

The role of the SRO could easily be considered one of the most debated topics in the discussion of school resource programs. The minimum requirement for the program is a sworn-police officer with the powers to make an arrest. In addition, many authors to include Hurley Swayze (2014) recommend the officer selected for the program be an experienced officer. Add to this the role of counselor, mentor, mediator, and educator, and as noted by Lambert & McGinty (2002), "it would take a very special individual to fulfill them all satisfactorily."

It is often the switching between these roles that can cause the greatest challenge to the SRO. There can be an easily confused line where the enforcement of a school rule can escalate into a police enforcement action. In order to minimize this issue, many studies have called for the establishment of clearly delineated roles and expectations for the SRO officer (McKenna, 2016; Hurley Swayze, 2014; McDaniel, 2001). This is also where the discussion of the "school-to-prison pipeline" begins.

There is a growing body of research that is indicating that schools with the presence of a SRO are more likely to result in the use of arrest and citations to manage discipline issues (Hurley Swayze, 2014; McKenna et al, 2014). The advent of zero-tolerance policies followed federal measures of the 1990's which increased violations for drugs and weapons on school grounds and also allowed school districts to use federal funding for security reasons (McKenna, 2016). With the increase in the number of SROs assigned to schools, researchers have found that violations that previously would have been handled via school discipline are now being handled through the formal juvenile justice system (Hurley Swayze, 2014). We have experienced similar observations in Columbia Heights as these have been concerns of both the school district and the city. This information illustrates the importance of identifying the role and responsibilities of the SRO at the beginning of the program to develop standards for what will be criminal violations sent to the court system, and school discipline which may be more appropriate, given the situation.

SRO Selection

In addition, there are some recommendations for how to select an SRO. Hurley Swayze (2014) is quoting the federal COPS office when she notes that the position should be voluntary and not forced on any officer. The ideal traits they have identified in order are: 1) likes kids, 2) have the right demeanor, 3) have experience, 4) work independently, 5) be dependable, 6) work hard 7) be an effective teacher, 8) have integrity. The report suggests minimum qualifications of two to three years of service for most candidates. Once selected, it is suggested that the role have sufficient duration to allow for relationship building and increased effectiveness.

SRO Training

Training is another aspect in which there is ample opportunity to make an impact. The COPS office recommends new SROs receive both pre-service and in-service training in the following: 1) teaching 2) mentoring and counseling 3) working collaboratively 4) managing time 5) applying juvenile law and case law. (Hurley Swayze, 2014). In addition, the ACLU also recommends training in child and adolescent psychology, positive behavioral interventions and support, conflict resolution, peer mediation and restorative justice, children with disabilities (and other special needs), and cultural competency. As this is an extensive and resource intensive list, a plan would need to be created to accomplish this training in an effective manner.

Results of the Survey Conducted by the MN Department of Public Safety

Of special note in this review is a statewide Minnesota survey published in 2014 that involved responses from a majority of the school resource officers in the state. There were many interesting findings from the perspective of the SRO in this survey, and it has been referenced throughout this review. Some of the findings are below:

Under the triad model of SRO work, (Law Enforcer, Informal Counselor, Educator) the majority (62%) of the respondents viewed their primary role as a Law Enforcer. Ninety-one percent of the respondents included monitoring the grounds and hallways as part of their normal duties while less than half (44%) indicated they enforced school rules on a daily basis. Twenty-one percent of those that responded felt they spent too much time enforcing school rules and codes of conduct. Over 80% reported engaging in mentoring, resolving conflicts, and addressing illegal acts on a weekly basis with about half of those doing these tasks daily. About 90% felt they were spending the right amount of time in these areas.

In terms of relationships, 99% of those surveyed indicate they enjoy working with youth and are comfortable when students come to them with problems. Eighty-six percent of SROs feel their opinions are valued by school administration and 78% thought that school administrators understand the legal limitations. Only 35% of respondents felt pulled between the two agencies, and 82% felt valued as an SRO.

The statewide survey was limited in that it only addressed the issues from the standpoint of the SRO and did not address school staff, students, or police agencies. However, there is much more extensive information in the state survey results and those interested in the topic are encouraged to view the full publication for further details.

Method

The focus of this review was on the administration and teachers of the Columbia Heights Middle School and High School. Key school administrators were identified and they were interviewed in detail to determine their expectations and experiences. Faculty was asked to complete an online survey distributed through an email link. School district administration took charge of distributing the link to faculty they felt would have information to contribute. There are approximately 120 faculty located in the two schools surveyed for this process. There were a total of 33 responses collected with a confidence interval of approximately +/- 11.67% for the survey results. One administrator was interviewed at the district level, two members of the high school administration, and three members of the middle school administration. All interviews were conducted by Sergeant Ted Fischer.

Results

Administration

All of the members of the school administration selected safety as the main role for the SROs assigned to the schools. As part of this function, they were looking for someone that would engage in activities that were designed to identify and prevent safety concerns from occurring at the schools. In addition, they want the SRO to be someone who can take charge and lead in the time of an emergency.
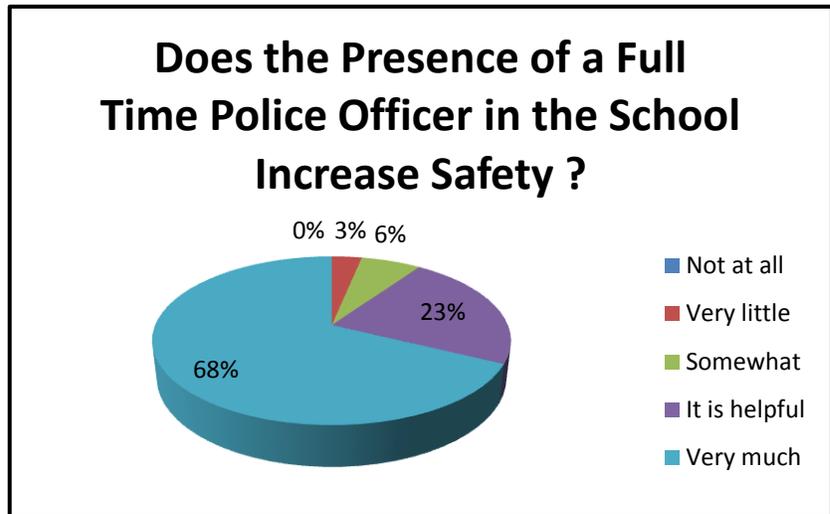
The next role that was identified as being important by all administrators was the ability to make positive relationships with students and staff. This was also evident in the traits they identified as important in an SRO that included being approachable, a good communicator, work well in a team, friendly, reliable, and consistent.

All of the administrators felt the SROs have been, and continue to be, well trained and make the school safer with their presence. They all have high expectations with how much time they would like the SRO to spend in the school with the response ranging from 80% of their time to 100% of their time. They all stressed the importance of having the SRO on site when an emergency or other need occurs.
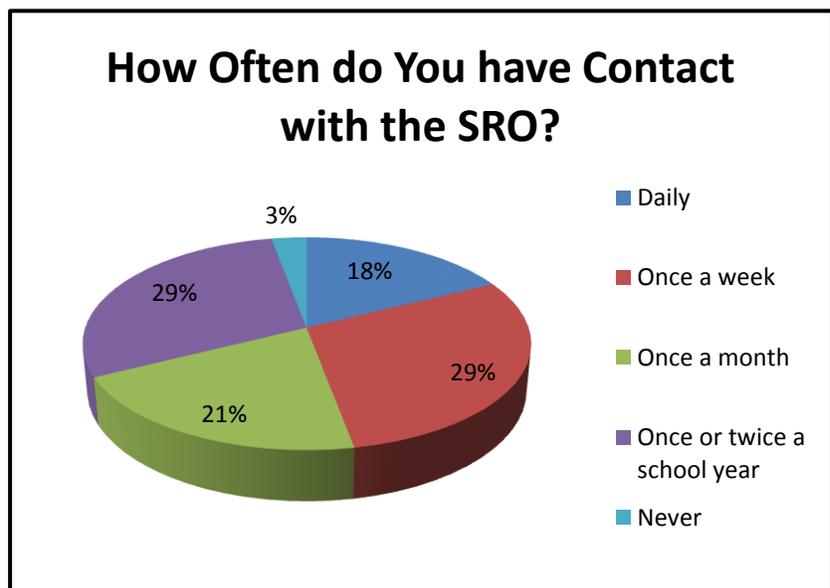
While there was some variation in how each location felt the SRO should be spending their time, all agreed the top priority was interacting and mentoring youth. Following up on reports, monitoring the hallways and lunchroom, and conducting youth programs rounded out the remaining examples on the list.
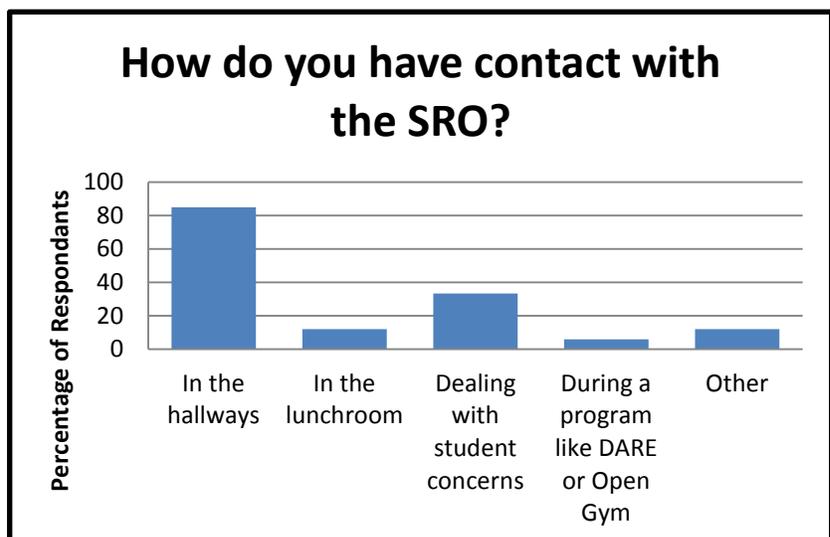
Faculty Survey

A large majority of the faculty surveyed felt a police officer assigned to the school increased safety.

Does the Presence of a Full Time Police Officer in the School Increase Safety ?

0% 3% 6%

23%

68%

- Not at all
- Very little
- Somewhat
- It is helpful
- Very much

When asked how often they have contact with the SRO, about 1/5 of those responding said they see them daily with just less than half seeing them on a weekly basis.

How Often do You have Contact with the SRO?

3%

18%

29%

29%

21%

- Daily
- Once a week
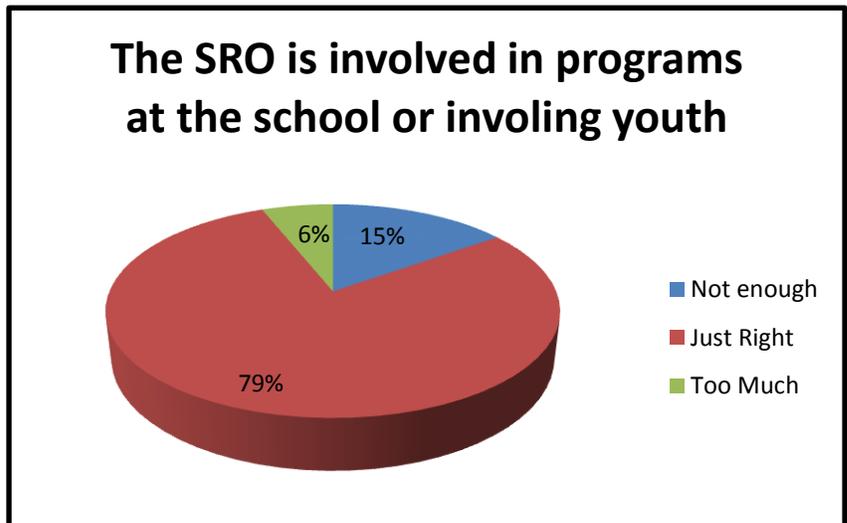- Once a month
- Once or twice a school year
- Never

The majority of those surveyed had contact with the SRO in the hallways, with dealing with student concerns listed as the next most likely occurrence.

How do you have contact with the SRO?

Percentage of Respondants

100
80
60
40
20
0

In the hallways | In the lunchroom | Dealing with student concerns | During a program like DARE or Open Gym | Other

The staff was right in the middle with whether the SRO was visible in the hallways enough. This is an area where more focus could be considered.
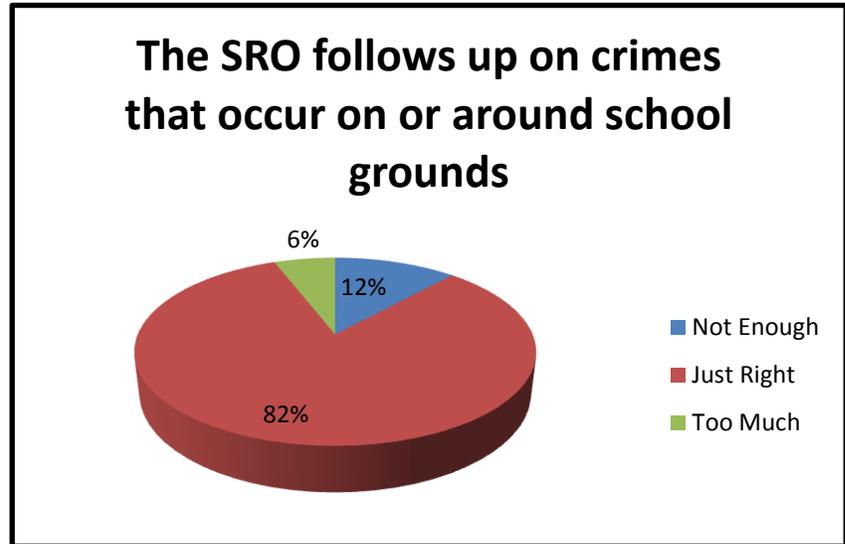
The SRO is visible in the hallways

- 0%
- 47%
- 53%

Legend:
- Not enough
- Just Right
- Too Much
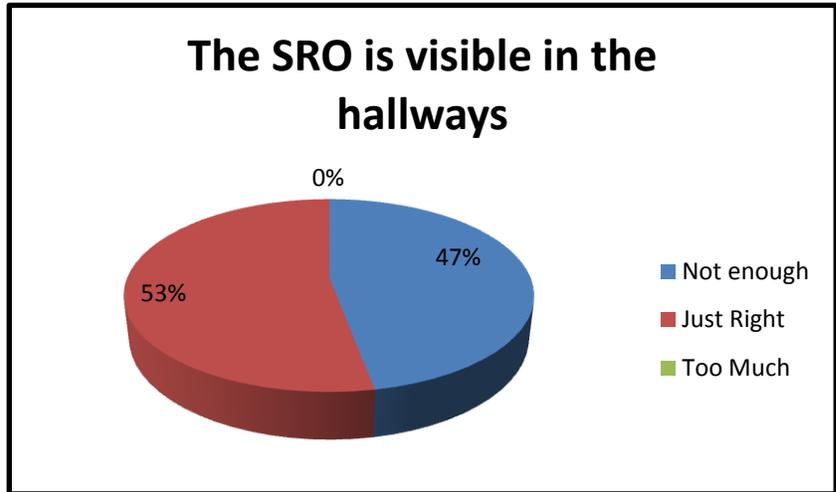
The respondents did feel the SROs were involved in the right amount of school programs involving youth.

The SRO is involved in programs at the school or involing youth

- 6%
- 15%
- 79%

Legend:
- Not enough
- Just Right
- Too Much

There was a feeling that the SROs were not spending enough time engaged in classroom presentations, with 38% indicating they were spending the right amount of time.

The SRO is involved in doing classroom presentations

- 0%
- 38%
- 62%

Legend:
- Not Enough
- Just Right
- Too Much
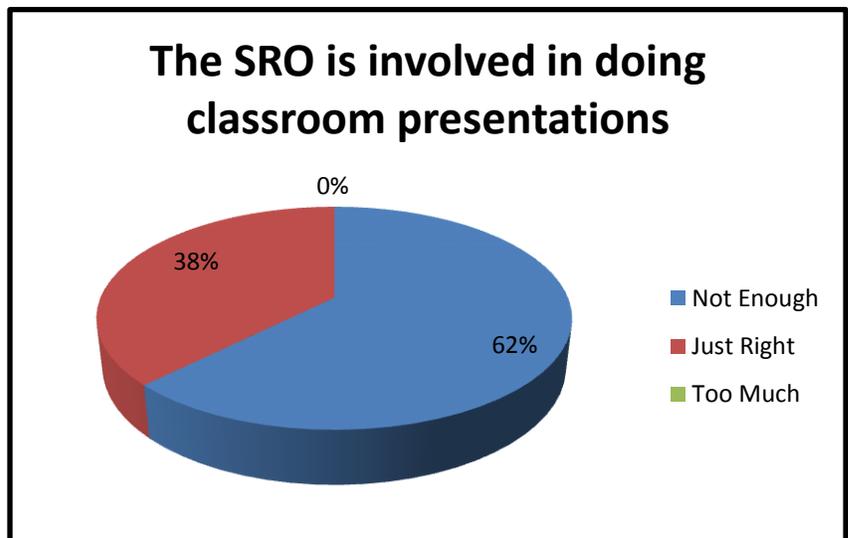
Finally, the majority of the respondents felt the SRO spent the right amount of time following up on crimes at the location with 82% indicating the time was the right amount.

The SRO follows up on crimes that occur on or around school grounds

6%

12%

82%

- Not Enough
- Just Right
- Too Much

In addition to the survey questions listed above, the faculty was asked to identify the traits an ideal SRO would possess. That information is below:

Skills or Traits the ideal SRO would possess:

- Communication (8)
- Approachability (7)
- Accessible (5)
- Consistent (4)
- Engagement/build relationships (4)
- Relatability (3)
- Friendly (3)
- Authoritative/Direct (3)
- Fair (3)
- Be visible (2)
- Respectful (2)
- Flexible (2)
- Patience (2)
- Quick Response (2)
- Reliable (2)
- Responsive (2)
- Personable
- Earns respect from students
- Connect w/kids who are at risk

- Relationship skills
- Calm in crisis
- Conflict resolution skills
- Compassionate
- Conscientious
- Assertive/strong presence
- Firmness
- Confidence
- Create a safe and trusting environment for students and staff
- Diplomacy
- Empathetic
- Just
- Innovative with consequences
- Keep a relaxed demeanor
- Know all students, not just the trouble makers

- Knowledgeable, trained
- Level headed and calm
- Likes to work with kids
- Open and Honest
- Integrity
- Promote equity and justice
- Follow through
- Dependable
- The ability to sort truth from fiction as told by students
- Understanding
- Understanding of diversity and equity
- Understanding of roles in building and when to intervene

Other feedback provided included:

- "Great program and helps ensure safety in school. One idea is more classroom presentations - possibly helping with drug unit in health [class]"
- "In a community/district like Heights, I think having a School Resource Officer is critical - not only for school safety, but in improving how our students view law enforcement. Currently, I don't feel that this is happening."
- "Jason Piehn [the High School SRO] is an asset to our school."
- "Officer [Jason Piehn] is doing an amazing job at the high school. The kids really like and trust him!"
- "Our police officer is a class act-excellent!!!!"
- "Really like our current guy"
- "We love [Danielle Pregler] the Middle School SRO!"
- "We would greatly benefit having an officer who is a person of a different race other than white."

Columbia Heights School Resource Officers

In addition to the participation in the MN Statewide Survey, the two officers assigned to the SRO position in Columbia Heights for 2015-2016 were interviewed for this evaluation. They both reported the largest part of their day was spent on writing reports and conducting follow-up investigations. Mentoring youth and monitoring hallways, respectively, were the next largest blocks of time spent.

The Columbia Heights SROs felt their biggest priority was making relationships with the students. While this was noted as the biggest priority by both SROs, they indicated it does not currently get much time. One SRO indicated they spent about an hour a day on this task, while the other put the estimate at between one to two hours a day. Both indicated they spent about the same amount of time doing reports and follow-ups, and between 1.5 to 2.5 hours monitoring the lunch room and hallways. Miscellaneous programs made up the remaining of their spent time.

Both SROs agreed that their presence in the school was an important factor in school safety and meeting the expectations of the school administration. One of the respondents indicated they felt the time demands for school-related programs was too high and should be reduced. This area should be looked into further to determine if adjustments should be made to the current programs, or if improvements in time management are warranted.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of both the Columbia Heights Survey, as well as the statewide survey conducted by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, the Columbia Heights SRO program is meeting the expectations set for it. With that being stated, there are still opportunities for the program to grow and improve.

One of the repeated recommendations in the literature, as well as the statewide survey, and the comments from the Columbia Heights school administration, is the understanding of roles and how they apply to school rules. There are several ways in which this can be done, one of which is to define the role in the Memorandum of Understanding between the city and the school district. Other less formal methods would include a meeting with the school administration and the SRO supervisor at the beginning of the year. This meeting should delineate expectations for the SRO involvement in enforcing schools rules, and a mutual education about the law and school rules between the two organizations. A follow-up meeting should be planned for the end of the school year to determine what successes and opportunities for improvement occurred. This learning can then be put in place for the next school year.

The establishment of roles can also help to mitigate the concern regarding the "school to prison pipeline" that is emerging as a trend in some locations. In summary, the concern being raised is the involvement of the police in incidents which otherwise would have been handled as a school discipline matter. Establishing what the roles are up front, and what types of behavior will be handled by the school versus through the formal justice system, can help in reducing the instances where youth are entered into the criminal justice system prematurely.

Many of the above recommendations are also reflected in the Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Pillar 4 of the report recommends, *"Communities should adopt policies and programs that address the needs of children and youth most at risk for crime or violence and reduce aggressive law enforcement tactics that stigmatize youth and marginalize their participation in schools and communities"*. This recommendation is followed by a series of action steps which are important to consider while defining these police and school administrator roles. The actions steps include:

> *4.6.1 Education and criminal justice agencies at all levels of government should work together to reform policies and procedures that push children into the juvenile justice system.*

> *4.6.2 In order to keep youth in school and to keep them from criminal and violent behavior, law enforcement agencies should work with schools to encourage the creation of alternatives to student suspensions and expulsion through restorative justice, diversion, counseling, and family interventions.*

4.6.3 Law enforcement agencies should work with schools to encourage the use of alternative strategies that involve youth in decision making, such as restorative justice, youth courts, and peer interventions.

4.6.4 Law enforcement agencies should work with schools to adopt an instructional approach to discipline that uses interventions or disciplinary consequences to help students develop new behavior skills and positive strategies to avoid conflict, redirect energy, and refocus on learning.

4.6.5 Law enforcement agencies should work with schools to develop and monitor school discipline policies with input and collaboration from school personnel, students, families, and community members. These policies should prohibit the use of corporal punishment and electronic control devices.

4.6.6 Law enforcement agencies should work with schools to create a continuum of developmentally appropriate and proportional consequences for addressing ongoing and escalating student misbehavior after all appropriate interventions have been attempted.

4.6.8 Law enforcement agencies and schools should establish memoranda of agreement for the placement of School Resource Officers that limit police involvement in student discipline.

The second area of growth that should be examined is the category of training. While the lists proposed in the statewide survey may be too lengthy and cost-prohibitive to tackle at one time, there should be an examination of what training needs are present for each officer assigned to the school, and a plan put in place to address these. Of note, school administrator surveys indicated that while the SROs had extensive knowledge of juvenile law, they were short when it came to understanding the role of the school administration and their role and abilities. Cost sharing for appropriate training should be discussed with the school district when appropriate.

Role determination and training will only go so far if you do not have the right officer. The CHPD should make efforts to recruit and mentor experienced officers for the role of the SRO. This will aid in finding the right fit for the position, and avoid a situation in which a less than enthusiastic officer is assigned to the position.

Finally, the individual SROs can use these survey results as a guide for how to help manage their time. Being a visible presence in the building goes a long way in meeting the expectations for the school administration and faculty. In addition, this is time that can be spent building relationships and mentoring youth. Worth noting in the survey results were the differing views on how best the SRO should spend their time. While all agreed that it was important to have the SROs involved in youth programs like DARE and classroom teaching, some school administrators had high expectations of on-site time for SROs that would make it difficult to do both. This is another example of an issue that should be addressed up front to ensure that roles and time expectations are being met both at the school and at the district level.

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