

DISTRICTS RE-EVALUATE THE ROLE OF SROS

ANNIKA BHANANKER
Editor in Chief

In 2020, ‘school safety’ evokes images of masks and diligent sanitizing. But when students finally return to brick-and-mortar schooling, another recent issue, the movement to reform policing in America, will be on the mind of many students as they ask whether schools should be policed.

School Resource Officer (SRO) programs vary across the country, but they generally consist of a partnership between a school district and local police departments. According to OSPI, the official purpose of an SRO is to promote positive role models and inform students of laws regarding drug and alcohol use.

Recent protests against police brutality and Black Lives Matter groups have identified police presence as an area of danger for young students. Across the country, footage of school officers abusing power have gone viral. Additionally, investigations into the frequency of events of violence or negative interactions on school campuses found a significantly higher rate of incidence among black students than any other race, regardless of the frequencies of infractions committed by this group.

“IN MY CAREER, I HAVEN’T HAD STUDENTS EXPRESS THAT THEY ARE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE PRESENCE OF AN SRO.”

MISD’s School Resource Officer program began 1996, and MIPD currently employs a full-time armed officer to serve as a liaison between the police department and the high school.

At MIHS, there have been no reported complaints of this nature about the SRO program.

“In my career, I haven’t had students express that they are uncomfortable with the presence of an SRO,” MIHS associate principal Nick Wold said.

48% OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE US HAVE AN ARMED POLICE OFFICER, TYPICALLY AN SRO.

However, an MIHS Journalism survey, which received 39 responses found that 10 students (24%) said they “disagree[d]” with the statement “I feel that the presence of an armed

SRO positively impacts my level of safety at school.”

An SRO has the power to both enhance and diminish feelings of safety at school – feeling safe is dependent on an individual’s association with the position. For some, an armed officer is reassuring in case of emergency, while for others law enforcement, especially when armed, is threatening. In fact, of the 39 students in the aforementioned survey, 18 “agree[d]” while 10 “disagree[d]” with the statement, “I feel that the presence of an armed SRO positively impacts my level of safety at school.” Of the 18 students who agreed, 12 of these students specifically attributed this feeling of security to an SRO’s role in the event of school shootings or other similar

emergency situations.

Especially with extensive news coverage of school shootings, which came to the national forefront in the ‘90s, many school districts have upped their security. Thus, the prevalence of SROs, as well as both negative and positive associations with the role, have greatly increased. In fact, between 1999 and 2015, the percentage of students with an SRO in their school increased from 54% to 70% nationwide.



“Black students and students with learning disabilities are about

3 times more likely than white students and students without disabilities, respectively, to be **ARRESTED IN SCHOOL.**”

– ACLU

Superintendent Donna Colosky recalled that after the mass shooting in Parkland, Fla. 2018, she received calls from concerned parents who urged an increased police presence – many asked for one stationed at each MISD school.

In a Washington Post investigation examining 197 instances of school shootings since 1999, an SRO successfully intervened to stop the school shooter in only one instance. Since the article, there have been two more such instances. The extent to which SROs prevent or deter school shootings remains to be proven. The District pushed back against these 2018 demands, and now, Colosky says, they face an opposite situation with some calling for SRO removal.

“MISD CONTINUES TO CHAMPION THEIR INCLUSIVITY, BUT BY NOT LISTENING TO STUDENTS WHO VOICE THEIR CONCERNS WITH THE SRO IS CONTINUING TO PROVE THEY WON’T INCLUDE STUDENTS IN MANY IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS.”

Colosky emphasized that the SRO’s value does not lie in the response to emergencies, rather in the relationships the officer makes with students. “[Emergency response] is an important

part of the job but I think it’s a little bit of a misunderstanding that an SRO is an armed guard who is keeping the bad guys out. That’s not the premise of an SRO, and quite frankly, never has been,” Colosky said.

“It’s a relationship building piece that I really find to be the most advantageous part of having an SRO on campus -- of having him in the building,” principal Walter Kelly said.

“Yes SROs are first responders like all police officers ... but that’s not the bulk of their work, the bulk of it is building relationships,” Colosky added.

Another aspect administration hopes to emphasize is that the role is a resource for students, hoping that students will utilize an SRO for legal or personal needs.

When asked about the role an SRO plays in their school, 10 of 26 students responded that the SRO is responsible for safeguarding the school. Another six students were unaware of the position’s other stated duties.

Although students may be unaware of the SRO’s current role and responsibilities at their school, many are cognizant of the movements calling for their re-evaluation.

Seattle Public Schools, which established their partnership with SPD in 2005, published a resolution June 9, imposing an indefinite moratorium on all police presence in schools. Edmonds School District and many other districts nationally have made changes to existing SRO policies, ranging from the dissolution of these programs to disarmament, and many more variations.

In response to recent Black Lives Matter protests, several MI students scheduled a demonstration for June 12 in solidarity and to demand changes. The list of demands

was published online, and included a call for MISD to discuss “the presence of a resource officer and his power/role in the high school to follow the precedent of Seattle Public Schools’ decision to remove officers from their district for a semester.”

MIHS teachers also attended to show support for the student-led event. A June 10 email from MISD Superintendent Donna Colosky instructed teachers on how to request a day off in order to protest.

June 11, MIHS librarian Sarah Abreu replied to this email with a letter to Colosky, the MISD Board President and MIHS Staff. In it, she referenced Colosky’s previous email, which read: “Mercer Island School District stands in support of the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement and see them in conjunction with and not in opposition to our District’s values, vision, and mission.”

“This is patently false unless and until you remove [MIHS’ SRO] and all police presence from our schools. (See Section One, Point Number Three of the Demands of the Collective Black Voices of Seattle.)” Abreu wrote in response.

CONTINUED AT
[MIHISLANDER.ORG](https://mihislander.org)

